

PURITY

BY

DOUGLAS CLEGG

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

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I am the author – Douglas Clegg – and I hold the copyright, and in the electronic world that means: you don't have the right to reproduce this .pdf file.

However, you know what? I am giving you the right to pass it to friends who might enjoy this short novel (basically a novella), so long as you don't make any profit from sending it to friends, and of course, so long as every single word – including these words right here – remain the same. No changes. This is a bit of an experiment. People like Seth Godin (www.ideavirus.com) have done similar experiments with free ebooks. The ebook is in its infancy, and those of

us who are working in this medium are finding out just how best to reach readers with our work. Writing is both my joy and my labor, and it is my hope that this so-called experiment fires up your mind as you read *Purity*.

Why am I doing this? Well, first: as a short novel, *Purity* ran its life in the novella series from Cemetery Dance publishing (when you get a chance, check out the website for Cemetery Dance at www.cemeterydance.com -- it's a great one, with a lot of terrific books). *Purity* sold out from the publisher fairly quickly in a beautiful limited edition, with cover illustration by Gail Cross, and interior illustrations by Keith Minnion. You can still manage to snag a copy of the signed, limited edition at an online bookseller or an independent bookstore that carries hardcover limited editions from Cemetery Dance, but the copies are rare and becoming more rare with each passing day. If you are at all a collector, you may want to hunt one of these hard-to-come-by hardcovers down.

Purity had a second incarnation in the form of the an m-book serial – the m in m-book standing for mobile, as in mobile phone. www.beaker.net, an innovative young company dealing with the wireless world, sent it out to be read on cell phones, which is yet another way that books can be read (besides as...books. Ebooks and Print books, that is. Both types of which I love).

You may wonder why I'm sending out a .pdf file that is essentially free, of a short novel I wrote in 1999 that was published in hardcover in 2000.

Well, first: it's too short for a mass market paperback, which would normally be the logical next phase of the book's life. I will probably include it in an upcoming collection of my short stories, along with a new novella, but frankly, I want my fiction to be read. I don't want to write books that people don't read and think about and enjoy for one reason or another.

I'd like to ask that, if you feel like it, you tip the author. With cash? Sort of, but not sent directly to me in the form of checks or anything. I'd like to ask that you go to your favorite bookstores and ask for my books. And I'd like you to buy one of them. They're in paperback, mostly, so they cost between five and six bucks. What do you get for that five or six bucks? Well, I hope you get an entertaining story of terror and adventure and possibly a writer whose work you can begin to enjoy and be chilled by.

That's really all I ask here. I'll even provide links right here for you to find my books at my website, where you can read excerpts from the books, and where you can find them to buy on the Internet, if that's your preference. But I do encourage you to support your local bookseller. If they don't have any of my books, I do appreciate it if you order one at your favorite bookstore – I think you'll enjoy it, if you enjoy horror fiction.

Now, you don't have to buy one of my books. After all, I'll never know, and I'd rather you read *Purity* and passed it on to your friends (or send them the URL to get their own copy) than fret over buying another one of my novels or collections.

For those who don't know my stuff, I've been published since the end of 1989, when my first novel *Goat Dance* came out in paperback. Since then 12 of my novels have come out, including my recent e-series, *Naomi*, and *Nightmare House*.

I was given both the Bram Stoker Award and the International Horror Guild Award for my 1999 collection of short stories, *The Nightmare Chronicles*. I run

an email list, which serves as both a newsletter for me as well as a place where, each year since 1999, I've run a different email serial novel, usually toward the end of the summer. You can subscribe very easily by sending a note to:

DouglasClegg-subscribe@egroups.com -- I hope you'll join. It's free, of course, and is a lot of fun, particularly when the email serials run each year.

Here are the current novels of mine available, and where you can get them:

For the hardcover limited editions, go to this page online for information:

<http://www.douglasclegg.com/clegglimited.htm>

For the paperbacks of my recent novels (*Mischief, You Come When I Call You, The Halloween Man*, etc.) go to:

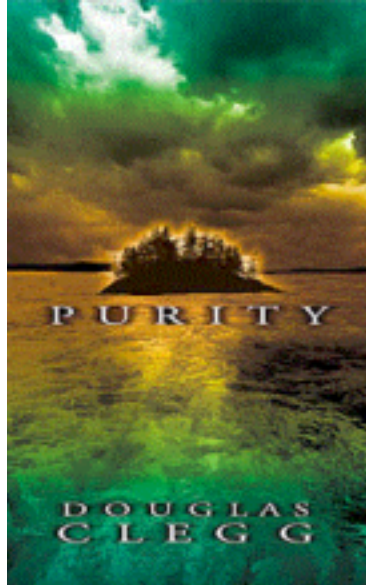
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Thank you for grabbing this file, and please send it to friends who might enjoy it. If you find you are engaged by my fiction, that's probably the greatest tip I can get as a storyteller. If you find you'd like to read more of my fiction, I thank you.

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PURITY © 2000 by Douglas Clegg

Purity was first published as a signed hardcover edition from Cemetery Dance Publications, *P.O. Box 943 Abingdon, Maryland 21009* / ISBN 1-881475-71-9

I encourage those who collect signed, limited editions to seek out the now-rare copies of the hardcover of *Purity*. Besides the beautiful cover design and illustration by Gail Cross, the book contains several interior illustrations that

are both stark and haunting, by Keith Minnion. Each hardcover is signed by me – DC – and it's a really beautifully produced book.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For Robert R. McCammon, for *Boy's Life*, *Usher's Passing*,
Swan Song, *Stinger* and *Blue World*, among others —
and for giving a young writer a few kind words when
no one else would.

“Vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome, it darted like a stupendous monster of nightmares to the monolith, about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms, the while it bowed its hideous head and gave vent to certain measured sounds.... Once I sought out a celebrated ethnologist, and amused him with peculiar questions regarding the ancient Philistine legend of Dagon, the Fish-God; but soon perceiving that he was hopelessly conventional, I did not press my inquiries.”

— “Dagon” by H.P. Lovecraft

Prologue

Why I called you here

1

There is no madness but the madness of the gods.

There is no purity but the purity of love.

2

Someone once wrote that “the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate its contents.”

This describes my feelings perfectly. I correlate too much of my own mind's contents. It's always troubling.

I don't live in the chronological moment; I doubt you do, either. I live all at once in the past with only glimpses of the present. I live mostly on that island, when it comes to me, when I think of my life as it formed.

I live in darkness now, but the dark brings the memories back.

The dark brings it all back.

The dark is all I know.

It's there that I find the god I met one day when I was just a child. I remember that day; not the days of blood to come.

In the end, we were together.

In the beginning, we were not.

3

Here are the words I will never forget:

“Owen, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I should never have come this summer.”

Before that, the gun went off.

Before that, I looked into her eyes.

Before that is when it all began.

Dagon, bring it back to me.

PART ONE

Summer Begins

Chapter One

Who I am

1

These are the things I know:

Outerbridge Island has briny water running beneath its rocks, a subterranean series of narrow channels between the Sound and the Atlantic. You can see the entrances to these channels on the northern side of the island at low tide. These channels feed into the Great Salt Pond on the westerly side of the island before it empties into the sea. It was said that once-upon-a-time, a Dutch trading ship smashed up against the rocks, and local pirates fed upon the treasures found within the hold of the ship. The treasure, it is said, was buried

in the narrow caverns. To add to the chill of this tale, it was also said that the pirates fed upon the flesh of the survivors of the wreck for days.

I've actually swum into the caverns at times. I'm slender enough, and in good enough shape to maneuver in the darkness of the water, but I never found treasure, nor did I emerge in the Great Salt Pond by following the channels within that part of the island. I needed air, after all.

If you want something badly enough, there are ways to get it. This doesn't mean that they are traditional means. It doesn't mean that pain is not involved. It doesn't mean that the cost may not overwhelm the need. It just means there are ways to get what you really want in this world.

If one has a conscience, one can be driven mad. Therefore, a conscience is a key to madness. Everyone is a potential madman. Everyone. The sweetest boy in the world can be driven to the most irrational of acts. The girl who has the world at her feet, likewise, could be driven to some act of desperation and tragedy.

And, in many ways, we want the irrational and the tragic and the desperate, because they bring meaning and life back into our existences.

Another fact: My mother prizes three things above all others:

The rose garden which my father planted for her before I was born. It runs in spirals along the bluffs and the small hillock behind our cottage. There are fourteen varieties of roses, with hues ranging from pale peach to blood red.

Her koi pond, which is really the Montgomery's koi pond, but it sits on our side of the property. It is largish for a pond, and narrow, nearly a reflecting pool. It was built deep for the harsh winters — the koi can survive a thick layer of ice as long as they can bury themselves down in the silt. My father covers the pool with a plastic tarp to further protect the fish.

And lastly, my mother prizes the gun.

My maternal grandfather had a small pistol that had been given to him by his mother. It was a small Colt pistol — what my grandfather called a vest pistol, but which I thought of as a Saturday Night Special. It had mother-of-pearl grips, and a clip that could not be removed from it. My grandfather had given my mother the pistol in the early years of her marriage for when my father would beat her. My father never beat my mother, but my grandfather would apparently not believe it. The pistol is useless, I heard my mother once say. Never been fired. I could barely shoot a cat with it, she joked. Someday, she told me, when she was weepy and bitter about life, she would go to Boston and sell it to a collector and take the money and go far, far away. When I first discovered my true god and his nature, I took the pistol.

Final fact:

Faith plays into all this. One must have faith that one can do what one sets out to do. One must have the courage of one's convictions. All the world's history teaches us this.

For me, it is that god I discovered.

I call it Dagon, although its name is unknown to me. It came from the sea, and I held it captive, briefly. I am its priest.

And Dagon, in a twisted and true way, upholds what I stand for.

One must stand for something.

For me, it is the force of love.

The undertow of love.

But that sounds romantic, and I'm not a romantic at all.

I've been called a lot of things since the day I was born; never romantic.

Schemer. Athlete. Brain. Manipulator. User. Common. Handsome.

Shallow. Arrogant. Mad. Sociopath. Cold eyes.

All by my mother.

Jenna Montgomery once told me I had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen on a boy.

I had to catch my breath when she told me that.

2

Years ago, I came upon the god during a storm of late November, a frozen, bitter storm, in which I had gotten caught down at the caverns, taking a dinghy out to look for the famous buried pirate treasure. I was twelve and lonely, and when I saw the god thrust in between a rock and a hard place, as it were, I knew immediately who and what it was, and how I should please it. I read in my father's bible that Dagon was the god of the Philistines; the Fish-God. I found other books, too, with titles like *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and *Dagon* that further told of the god and its worshippers and what was needed to feed the god.

Some may say it is just an abominable statue, a cheap and even grotesque trinket of some distant bazaar, brought by sailors or perhaps even the pirates. It is green with age, and made wholly of stone. Its eyes are merely garnet; its tail and fins carved with some exquisite artistry.

But when I bled a seagull over the cold eyes of the little god, while the storm raged around me, I felt a prayer had been answered.

I breathed easier then.

3

Breathing is essential to survival, and although this seems like a given, we know — scientifically — that it is not. Most of the problems of life are like that: simple, obvious, graspable, yet shrouded in a secret.

If one can breathe well — through any crisis, any exertion — then one will survive.

It is those who stop breathing who have let go of their wills to live.

I am what people in this world call a sociopath, although the idea of killing someone has never interested me. A sociopath is not necessarily a killer, and to assume this is to play a dangerous game. Just as not all famous people are rich, not all sociopaths are Jeffrey Dahmer. If Jeffrey was one at all. You must know this about me if you're going to understand exactly what went on at Outerbridge Island the summer I turned eighteen, the summer before Jenna Montgomery was to leave me forever.

They say that people like me can't experience love, but I find that a ridiculous statement. I'm fully capable of giving and receiving love, and it is monstrous to suggest otherwise. Even all those years ago, love burned in me just as it did any boy who had fallen.

My mother would take her daily pain pill as I grew up — her pains being life itself and even her child — and tell me that there were two kinds of people in this world, the kind that give and the kind that take, and I knew I was neither, but somewhere in between the rest of the world: I was someone who observed, perhaps too coldly sometimes. I still observe, and observation has brought me to this place again.

Outerbridge Island, with its rocky ledges and glassy sea, the fog that came suddenly, the sun that tore through clouds like a nuclear explosion, the summers that went for years; the years that passed in a summer.

The storms that came and stayed and never left.

4

Let me turn it all back to the day I was born, since from what I've read about sociopaths, it's fairly genetic. My grandmother was probably the carrier of the gene, since she went crazy and ended up in what they called a nursing home over in Massachusetts, but which I found out — later in life, of course — was an impoverished sanitarium, the sort of which nightmares are born. My mother told me that it was my grandfather's fault for driving her to do things

— again, not kill, for we have never been murderers — just things that caused people to believe my grandmother was insane. When I was born, my mother told me when I was eleven or twelve, I was a difficult birth and my own umbilical cord practically strangled me as I exited her body. She said I was blue in the face for nearly a minute from lack of oxygen before the doctor got me coughing. Then, I spent the first two weeks of my life in the hospital, for I was a month premature and no one thought I would live.

Sometimes I think this is why I'm a sociopath. I've seen documentaries on PBS about baby monkeys who are separated from their mothers for a short time, and this makes them seem without conscience (if that is truly what a sociopath is, although I don't believe it). My mother said she didn't touch me for the first month; she was terrified I'd die, and because she had already lost one child — two years earlier — in some kind of crib death scenario, she feared holding her first son, me. My father had to do all the touching and picking up, and even — my mother told me — when I had to nurse from her breast, she was too terrified. Instead, my aunt became my wet nurse — she who had, just five months before, given birth to twins and seemed to have milk enough for the entire population of the island. There were times, when I was older, that I wished my aunt had taken me back with her to her home on the mainland. Times when I hated the island. Hated my mother and father. Hated looking at

the Montgomery house — the Montgomery Mansion, the Montgomery palazzo, the Big Place — staring down at us.

But I suppose all this anger came about because of those first few days of life.

These things aren't spoken of much in families — how we each came to be. My mother suffered through bouts of depression, particularly in the winter, and she would stand in front of her bedroom window, looking out across the Sound, her face a shimmering reflection in the thick windowglass, and tell me all about myself.

She told me that when I was six weeks old, she realized I had never really cried, at least not the way babies were supposed to. Instead, I would turn red, and my mouth would open, and I'd scream. That's how she'd know I was hungry or needed changing. Because she was so grateful to have a child after she felt God had taken away her first in retribution for youthful transgressions, she tried not to think about what my lack of tears might mean.

As she'd tell this kind of story, I'd shift uncomfortably on her bed, wishing she'd release me from this kind of intimacy — the closeness of her depression, the morbid way her mind would pick over my birth and early years.

“I’m so sorry that you turned out this way,” she said, once, her hands going up to her face. “I’m happy you’re so smart. Not like your father. But this madness that comes over you...”

I remained silent, letting her have her feelings. I didn’t understand then to what she referred — I was not mad. I took the ferry to go to school over on the mainland and did quite well in school. The ferry takes an hour and a half in the winter, and only runs twice a day — for school hours, since Outerbridge had no school of its own. Thus, I spent many nights with my Aunt Susan in Rhode Island, and learned more about my mother’s mother than I had ever wanted to know. I also managed — through my cousin Davy — to make friends off-island, friends who believed I was like them. And I had a lot of friends as a child. Although I was not considered handsome at first — at least by my mother who found my hair to be too ominous in some way, my eyes too blue and perhaps too sharp, my manner arrogant (even as an eight-year-old, she’d called me that) — I began learning the secret of athletics early, and applied myself to molding my body the same way I went about molding my mind: I studied and read and found the boys who seemed to know what they were doing, and I gravitated towards them. I learned what they knew by nature. I was uncoordinated in most sports, until I realized that, as in all things, it was about breathing.

This is one of the secrets of life: it's all about breathing.

5

Voices in the dark:

"It's all right, I know you. I know what we both want."

"Shut up. Just shut up."

"Come here. Come here. Let me help you. It's all right. It feels good."

"No, not like this. No."

"I've been so lonely."

"Oh."

"Wanting this."

"Oh."

"Since the first time I saw you."

"Oh."

6

Have you ever felt that you would do anything to be with someone?

I almost feel sorry for you, if you haven't.

7

The purity of life is in the secrets — they're simple, they say everything, they are there for anyone, but we must wake up to the purity first in order to understand the secrets.

My pursuit of physical excellence began early. I tackled solitary athletics since this seemed best for my character. They were also cheaper. My family was poor — have I mentioned that? Not poor poor. Not “out in the street with no food” poor, but poor nonetheless. My mother's first husband had been rich, but had been a gambler. My mother — I should call her Boston, for that's what my father called her even though her name was Helen — had been the fifth daughter in a wealthy family who had married well the first time around.

But that man — someone I had never in my life heard of beyond knowing he existed — apparently lost all his and Helen's money, and soon she found my father, a good man one would suppose, who began his work life as a groundskeeper at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, but ended up working as a gardener for rich folk. It paid well enough — like I said, we weren't poor poor.

My father probably would've had more money, but he had a sister who was dying — for years — down in Annapolis, Maryland, and he was her only support. So, according to my mother, half of his income went to her upcoming. “She has the longest-lived cancer I’ve ever heard of,” she’d say, sometimes right in front of him.

Of course, this wasn’t all there was to it, but if I tell you all the secrets of the world at once, you’ll either be dazzled or overwhelmed, and there’s no point in making it all explode right now. You’ll want to know why breathing is one of the secrets of life.

All right, do you know how breathing is voluntary? I’ve heard that people with dementia sometimes end up forgetting how to breathe. That’s a terrible way to die, although one would suppose that any method of dying would be awful. Well, breathing is the essential component of accomplishing anything.

I observed this early — I was on the school bus, and I noticed a little girl next to me who was terrified of an upcoming test we were about to take. She would, in fact, stop breathing for seconds at a time. I began to count her breaths, and I saw that for every four I took, she took one. I suggested to her that she try just concentrating on her breathing. After a bit of persuasion, she did. It didn’t seem to work. I withdrew my father’s pocketwatch — the one

I'd stolen (yes, I stole things regularly around the house. I have reasons, none of which you want to know.) I had learned a bit about hypnosis, so I asked her to stare long and hard at the brass of the watch as the sunlight reflected on it. She asked me if I'd be putting her under. I told her no. This was, after all, just suggestion, nothing more. I would suggest something to her and would hope that her mind would accept it. Of course, I was a child. I didn't say it that way. I said it in some little boy way. But eventually, staring at the watch so much that her eyes teared up, I began to help modulate her breathing. By the time we reached school, she wasn't half as upset anymore about the test.

I began asking the other boys — the older ones who were good at softball and running — what their secrets were. To get their secrets, I entertained them with my modest ventriloquism skills — I could do bird calls and the sounds of crickets and even get a brief sentence out without moving my lips.

Boys like entertainment — so they opened up and told me about athletics and sports.

They all said screwy things, but what I noticed were two solid answers: breathing and imagination.

They made sure that they breathed through everything. They also imagined that they would win.

This was a huge revelation to me, since I had never felt that I could win anything. I realized that these other boys were winners in athletics because they in fact believed they were — whether from coaches, friends, family or whomever — and because they did not stop breathing. They used their breathing — without even knowing it — to help keep their bodies working.

All right, that sounds simplistic. But I believe that the simplest things can lead to the strongest results.

So, I began working on breathing.

This was not merely inhaling and exhaling, but swimming at the beach in the icy spring and holding my breath under water. After all, if I were going to be lord of my own breath, I needed to master everything about it, didn't I? I wasn't sure that I'd ever be a great breath-holder, because I never seemed able to go much beyond a minute. I was holding on too much to my fear of dying.

This is one of the first lessons about breathing — if you have breath within your lungs, you will not die. Death comes once there is no more breath.

Again, simple. Again, true.

“Owen,” my mother said, pinning the laundry up outside the cottage that the Montgomery's housed us in. “What in god's name are you doing?”

I had come up after logging in a minute-and-a-half beneath the water, right at the rocky ledge. I had just leaned over and thrust my face underwater.

I was eleven at the time. I tried to explain to her the principle behind my experiment, but she did not seem to understand. However, within a few short months, I had become best friends to the captain of the swim team in seventh grade, and by fall, I was running cross country. I would never be the best — this was not my goal after all. I would be a winner.

In fact, I knew I would close in on this with each sport or endeavor I tried — the other kids were lazy. Life and their families made them that way. I did not intend to let a day go which I could not claim as my own. I was going to own life in a way that neither of my parents ever had.

Academics slipped in my middle school years — but not enough for anyone to notice. I read studiously, and never for enjoyment, but to understand systems of thought that the world was trying to push at us. I learned quickly that an A+ in school sometimes meant a D- in life, and that in fact equal effort had to be made to excel in both spheres. Breathing helped.

When I felt overwhelmed by it all, I practiced my breathing again. Even in December, when the island was desolate and the water was cold enough to drown, I would leap into the sea and stay beneath the water for as long as I could; I would, if possible, use the Montgomery's indoor swimming pool for my morning workout which began at six a.m.

8

That was the wonderful thing about the Montgomery's place:

They were usually gone all winter unless Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery were fighting, or Mr. Montgomery had gone off with one of his mistresses and Mrs. M was so angry she came to the island for a blisteringly cold February. I used to see Mrs. M in those cold Februarys, and I ran errands in town for her because she spent too much time staring at the walls or sitting along the indoor pool while I did laps. She enjoyed letting me swim there, and she sometimes even got in and did laps, too. Once, when I was twelve, Mrs M told me, "You're turning into quite the handsome boy, Owen Crites." She was in good shape for a woman of forty, and there were times when I was with her that she reminded me so much of Jenna it was almost like having Jenna there with me. When I watched her back, as she got out of the pool, bathing cap on, her narrow waist, the way the water beaded upon her skin — it was like seeing Jenna for a moment. This made me happy. Jenna meant a lot to me.

But the pool — dare I describe it now, how I remember it? It was vast. It was Olympic size. I could do real laps there as opposed to laps at the beach which ended with a summer lifeguard blowing a whistle for me to come to shore before I'd gone out twenty yards. It was off the northern wing of their

estate, and was constructed so that it was as if you were swimming outside, as if on the bluffs over the Sound, you owned the world as you went back and forth, breathing, carefully breathing so as not to wear out too fast.

Because, during those winters when the M's stayed down in Manhattan, my father and mother and I had the run of the house, I could swim naked in the pool, and rise to see the reflection of my body in the long mirrors that were in the small locker room off the pool. By my sophomore year in high school, I had created — and mastered — a beautiful, strong body, and what average looks I had were masked by health and physical near-perfection. I didn't admire this because I believed in beauty.

Beauty is for the lazy.

I admired it because I knew the world admired it, and I wanted to own the world.

Wrestling was my winter sport at school, and I did not excel at it, but I held my own. The girls loved me — and the boys, too. I never got too close to them, because I had to spend all my concentration on creating who I was. But the girls all cheered for me in the sweaty matches as I brought some great bull of a boy from a competing school down to the red mat. Because the psychological aspect to sports can't be emphasized enough, I would — with

each match — create some threat to my opponent. Something I could whisper in his ear.

This took no small amount of planning, as it meant I had to do research on those I wrestled, so I would know just what button to push to take away their psychological edge. Dagon helped me; my god took me to books and ideas and notions, if you will, that showed me just what other boys would be most hurt by. Usually, it involved their sense of sexuality. After all, even I knew that showering with other boys all day, wearing jockstraps, cracking jokes about everything from dicks to pussies, was a veil across homoeroticism among adolescents. And who but wrestlers were closest to puncturing that veil? So, I would whisper to my opponent something about him, something perhaps his closest friend had told me — his closest friend, drunk, being taken out to a parking lot — his closest friend who, with six beers in him, would finally admit to something that my opponent would be happiest to hide for a thousand years.

Sometimes, it was less interesting. My threat might be, “I know your little sister, Trey. I know all about her leg. I would hate for something to happen to her. I would hate for someone to do something to a little girl so sweet.”

You may judge me for this if you like. It was a competitive edge, and this is what we, in athletics, were taught: to find our edge.

Skill alone never wins.

I wish it did, but lazy people think that way.

Faith is necessary, too. I had found mine. It had grown within me.

Now, this began rumors about me, but I had built up a loyal following of other boys and girls in school. I became head of the pep squad for the football team — team sports were never my thing, but I knew that I had to somehow attach myself to them. So, when kids from other schools began talking about me saying “crazy, psycho” things, I had friends who were willing to lay down and die for me rather than accept those lies. I really liked the kids I went to high school with; I liked the teachers. It was easy for me to like them. I think even being poor helped — teachers saw me as an underdog rising. I would tutor children in the local elementary school some afternoons; I took the coach’s daughter to the junior prom, just because I was a nice guy and I felt bad that she wasn’t pretty enough to get asked by any of the other guys. I was well-liked, and sometimes, that carries you.

But I haven’t mentioned much about Jenna yet, have I? In all this talk of I, she has not yet entered not in the way she should’ve. She was not at my school. She was not within my sphere. She was outer, she was beyond beyond.

How could I take her to the prom when she only arrived at Outerbridge Island in the summers?

I would count the days until Memorial Day weekend, when the Outerbridge Majesty would arrive in Quonnoquet Haven, heavy with tourists and summer people, and there, on the highest deck, I'd see her with my binos and I would lay back in the muddy grass and look up at the paling sky and think: please remember what we promised. Remember everything and don't leave anything out.

Remember why I came to you and why you let me and why it would make everything be the way it was supposed to, and why you're the reason for my every breath.

That's what had happened when I was twelve and dedicated my soul to the god of dark places. By the time I was seventeen, I was a dedicated servant to the one I worshipped.

And the only thing I asked of this divinity was:

Give me Jenna.

I found a cat over in town, and with just a pen knife, offered its soul to my god.

9

I'll tell you now, that it's safe, what really happened the summer that I discovered purity — genuine purity — in the shit of human existence. I can see myself as I was then, handsome, young, even pretty in a way with my thick hair falling to either side of my face, my blue eyes sharp, yes, but expectant. My shirt is an Izod, a preppie affectation — my mother never wanted me to look like the other islanders, she wanted something better for me, as did I. Khakis, no socks, Topsiders or sandals — my face burning from the beginnings of summer sun, my heart racing. It's no longer me as I am, it's that boy, that boy who is almost eighteen, a man at this point, a man who has nearly won in life.

I, he, you, it doesn't matter what I call that boy-man, he just is, I can feel his breath, I can smell the Old Spice on him, I can practically see the cap on his front tooth that cost his father a pretty penny after he fell and chipped it in sixth grade while he was running — I can practically see the fog lift between this day and that one.

He watches for her.

Chapter Two

Memorial Day, restless nights, and an open window

1

Let me take you there.

Fly like a bird over the crotch of New England – that place where Rhode Island clutches at its small corner between Massachusetts and Connecticut, and out to the Sound, across the scattering of islands and islets and outlands until you see the One Man Rocks, the places where misanthropists going by the name of New Englanders lived two to three per islet – and then, beyond the beyond, as my mother would say, thar she blows – Outerbridge, Outerbridge, Outerbridge. The name conjures up older names, and for me – or for him, for the me who was, Owen Crites, the Dutch fighting the Indians, the pirates

burying treasure beneath the land, and the people who built the walls. It even conjures all the names it must have had before, when the gods themselves had granted it some secret name. If Owen had known the secret name, he might have had power over it, but as it was, the island was master, and all who occupied its ground, servants.

The island's history began eons ago when some glacial giant swept the rocks and earth into the Atlantic and the world grew up around it. The Pequot and Narragansett Indians held it against the Dutch for as long as they could, and then the Brits wrested it for themselves. The island never provided much in the way of existence for any of its inhabitants; all that's left of the early English settlers were walls made of stone and foundations of cottages that speckle the northern end of Outerbridge (originally called a Dutch name that had sounded to the English like Outerbridge although there was a movement afoot among the summer residents to restore the old Pequot name for the place.) The largest beach, called the Serpentine by the British for its snaky shape, runs the western length. A Victorian Wedding Cake House called the Mohegan, converted in recent years to a twenty room hotel, sits perched on the main bluff overlooking the most public part of the Serpentine. On either side are the summer homes — the large and the ordinary, and the woods all mixed in and winding through them. More than half the roads on Outerbridge were

still dirt; there was no McDonald's, no 7-11, and only two stoplights between the three townships.

Spring shat out of winter in New England — and along the uneven row of islands called the Avalons that skirted Connecticut, Rhode Island, and a bare tip of Massachusetts, it was a heavy crap of rain and then sun and then rain and finally sun — the merciless summer sun which never left until two weeks after Labor Day. Outerbridge had it the worse, for the two other large Avalons — and the smaller rocky ledges called islets that formed part of the coastal barrier against the Atlantic — got the good weather first, or else no one much lived there to care.

Outerbridge, the furthest up the coastline was more narrow than wide — six miles long, two-and-a-half miles wide — with bluffs to the south and north, the Great Salt Pond at its center, the Wequetaket swamps in the lower points to the east; there are two hundred and fifty three summer residents; there are seventy-five in the winter, most of them over sixty. At the height of winter's cruelty, helicopters come in with supplies. That sounds outrageous, but it's true, for Outerbridge is further from the mainland than even the Vineyard and Nantucket to the north — it is beyond beyond beyond, and there is no crossing easily. The historic landmarks are South Light and North Light, the two lighthouses that still work, sentries at either end of the island;

Old Town, or Old Town Harbor as the old-timers call it, is at the southern tip; Quonnoquet Haven, with its bluffs and spectacular view of what they call the Big Nothing, where even the mainland is unseen in the distance, lays to the north of the island

This particular day was the glinting kind. Sun glinted off the Sound, and even the virgin leaves on the wet trees — and the bark, too — all of it spattered light refracted through the hangover of the night of rain so recently over. He hated it — he hated the end of winter, because it was usually the end of control within his parents house. His mother had been in bed for most of it, nursing imagined traumas, while his father had spent his hours away from home, either working as a handyman and gardener at the Big House, or in town or down to Old Town Harbor for drinks with his friends.

Owen Crites looked to summer for one thing, and one thing only. It would be the arrival of Jenna Montgomery, and that would mean that his misery, his feeling of loneliness would vanish.

It was a singular obsession of his.

She was purity.

2

“Hi,” he said to her when he was six.

“Hi,” she replied. But she hadn’t needed to. She was six and all ringlets and ribbons and party dress.

“Owen,” he said.

“I know. Hank’s your daddy.”

The fact that she called his father by his first name shocked Owen. No other child called a parent by the first name. It was taboo. And to call his father “Hank” and not “Henry” seemed far too familiar.

“I know where you live,” she added, an afterthought.

“Here,” he said, meaning her property.

“In my yard,” she said. “You have the big goldfish pond.”

“Koi,” he corrected her.

“And all the roses my mommy loves,” she said, and then took him by the hand and brought him into her world — the birthday party, the children from New York, the pony rides on the bluffs, the smoked turkey sandwiches, the games of pin-the-tail, and the dance. He had been woefully under-dressed in a torn pair of jeans and a t-shirt. The other boys all wore white shirts and little ties; their hair glistened with gel. The girls were in puffy dresses and glittery shoes. He had no gift for her then. It had panicked him midway through the party.

He went and found a gift she had not yet unwrapped, and he threw away the other child's card. On the wrapping paper, he scrawled — *Hapy Birthday from Owen.* As it turned out, the gift was a small hand puppet, and Owen took it from Jenna and began doing something that he didn't even know he could do.

He threw his voice, so it sounded as if the puppet were speaking without Owen's lips moving.

When it was found out what he had done, he was punished, but even Mrs M commented to Owen's mother about her son's delightful talent.

But forget that for now, forget it. Years passed; punishment was the result of knowledge. Smart people punished themselves, his older self knew. All people with brains received punishment.

He knew better than to reveal secrets.

He waited for her, watching the Sound for the ferry on the Thursday before Memorial Day weekend.

3

His eyes turned to slits against the western sun; it was the last ferry of the day, and he couldn't find her or her parents among those on the deck.

Perhaps she wouldn't be coming until after the holiday — it had happened before, but several years back. He didn't want to believe it because he never

liked to consider the options that people had. His own life felt without option.

He had created within himself the person who could most handle his life. He had worked his body, developed the grace of an athlete, he had tried to keep his face pleasant — and when the anxieties of his family or of studies became unbearable, he would go to the mirror and practice relaxing his facial features until he was sure he looked pleasant again. He did not want to seem anxious, even if he was. He wanted to give nothing away to those around him.

He ran down to the docks to see if she might be somewhere else on the ferry — perhaps she was sick and wanted to stay below. Perhaps she was taking a nap in the back seat of her family's Range Rover. Perhaps perhaps, he repeated to himself as he sloughed off inertia, and jogged down to the paved road near the marina.

The summer people were like ticks — they attached themselves to every aspect of the Haven, they drank all the beer, they ate the best the local cooks had to offer, they had all the accidents — more people would die from boating or swimming mishaps in three months than would die in six years in the other seasons of the island.

They were careless, they were bloodsucking, they were here to forget the venal world from which they came.

They, he thought.

They.

They poured from the ferry, bicyclists, clownish men and women in golfing outfits, or overly gilded women with poodles and wolfhounds and Shih Tzus, followed by weary overworked doctor-husbands; the college crowd, too, had begun filling up the local bars and the beach, and all these he hated with a passion. He had spent his life watching them come and be carefree in the summer. He had watched them spend more money some nights than his father could make in a month.

Dagon, he prayed, Dagon, hear me. Cast them down. Raise me up.

He ached for what they had. The lives they had. The freedom from this island. From the world he had mastered.

He read books on Manhattan; he learned about Jenna's family, how her great-great-grandfather had worked on railroads and then had gone on to own them, and how her great-grandfather had lost that fortune; how her grandfather had gotten into radio and television and magazines, owning several, selling them, building up a small but substantial media empire; how her mother had continued that work, married a great media magnate, divorced, married again, had Jenna and remained with Mr. M although the marriage ran hot and cold.

The story of Jenna's family was the story of all the summer people, and though they lived simply on the island for the three months, though they rode

cheap bikes around the Great Salt Pond, though they dressed casually even for the one restaurant in Old Town Harbor (the Salty Dog), they were all overmoneyed as his father often said.

His father spoke of money as evil; his mother spoke of it like a lost child.

Owen felt it was something like fire — to be feared and mastered. It was what other people were given.

It's what he would be granted.

And these people tromping off the ferry had it. They lived it. They did not dream of getting off this island. They dreamed of things beyond what Owen could imagine.

4

She never arrived, and he walked the long narrow wooden staircase from the beach up to the bluffs; and then he ran along the fringe of pines to the dirt path that went further up the rolling cliffs; and he didn't look back down to the water until he was at their property.

At the house, he went and sat in one of the wrought-iron lawn chairs and leaned back to gaze up at the sky.

“Owen?”

He sat up, looking around. He rose from the chair, practically knocking it over, and there she was — at the third story attic window.

No, it was Mrs. M. Her auburn hair was swept back from her face, damp from the swimming pool; her robe fastened none too tight. She possessed the air of having enjoyed life too much that day. “Owen? It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah, Mrs. M, me too. I didn’t think you had got here just yet.”

“Oh, my husband still hasn’t left his desk yet. I’ve been here since Wednesday. Good to be back. I despise the city.”

“Survive winter okay?”

“Superbly,” she said, but in a way that meant its opposite. Mrs. M was a woman full of irony; he had known it for years. Mrs. M embodied the house: beautiful, classic, and rich. “Do you want coffee?” she asked.

5

“I saw you waiting for her,” Mrs. M said. They were in the sunroom off the kitchen, and Owen had just finished his first cup of cinnamon coffee. He got up to pour himself another, but Mrs. M interceded; she had a fresh cup, with cream, all ready for him. He sat down at the table again. She took the chair across from him. He saw her knee emerge from her robe. The hint of her champagne glass breasts, small but perfect. Mrs. M was in many ways more beautiful than her daughter; but still, his heart belonged to Jenna.

He did what he could to look at her face, but something in her eyes bothered him. He looked, instead, at her silken arms.

“You’re in love with my daughter. No, that’s fine. I’ve known it since you were both young. Do you think it will lead anywhere?”

“Lead?” He said the word innocently, but she must’ve seen through this. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You’re smart. I’ve watched you grow up. You’re smart and handsome and wise. But, do you think that she will have you?”

“I haven’t...I haven’t considered...” he stammered.

“You’re a remarkable young man,” Mrs. M said. “She doesn’t deserve you.” Then, she put down her own untouched coffee, and stood up from the table. “She gets in tonight. After midnight.”

“How? The ferry —”

“She has her ways,” Mrs M said. She brushed something from the edge of her eye, and combed her hands through her hair like a mermaid would.

“Fancy a swim?”

“Not today,” he said.

“Come on, just a nice long swim. Have you been practicing all winter?”

He nodded.

“I thought so. You ripple now. You don’t move, you ripple. You’re in better shape than he is,” Mrs. M said, and then went to get her bathing suit.

6

Come midnight, he saw the shroud of some sailboat press beneath the lights of the harbor. He sat up on the bluffs and watched as she docked; as the sail came down. No one stepped off the boat at the jetty. Was it her? Was this what Mrs M had meant?

He fell asleep in the cool wet grass and awoke at dawn.

And he knew.

Jenna Montgomery had found another.

7

“Jimmy,” the guy said, his face gleaming, tanned, teeth so much thoroughbred he could’ve been in Pimlico, his eyes squinty, his nose small, his hair honey-blond from too much sun, and his handshake strong and sure and arrogant. He looked rich without ever having to say it. He smelled rich. He probably tasted rich. “Good to meet you, Crites.”

“Owen.”

“You’re not an Owen or a Crites,” Jimmy said. “You’re a Mooncalf.”

“Mooncalf?” Jenna laughed, looking at Owen and then back at Jimmy.

“That sounds ghastly.” She wore a bikini, but had a long towel draped about

her waist that ran all the way to her ankles. Her hair was wet and shining from a morning swim. For a moment, Owen imagined how it would feel to untie the bikini top and press his face against her breasts. For a moment, the image was in his mind; then, gone.

All Owen could think was: they'd slept together on the boat. Jenna and this Jimmy character. Jimmy had done it with Jenna.

Done it.

A sacred act if it was love.

A debased ritual, if it was lust and emptiness.

Which it had to be.

He tried not to imagine Jimmy drawing her legs apart, or the scent of passion that clung to them, the sweat and fever, as they joined together.

Tried not to imagine the thrusts.

"Mooncalf reminds me of upstate New York, or Pennsylvania," Jenna said with no little disgust. "Cows and chickens. Amish in carriages. Birthings and midwives. Owen can't be a Mooncalf."

Jim snorted. "No, it's a beautiful name. Mooncalf."

Owen remained silent, still numb from meeting the interloper.

"Well, if he's a Mooncalf then what am I?"

"Kitten," Jimmy laughed.

“If I’m Kitten, then you’re Cat.”

“All right, then I’m Cat. Now, what shall we call this island?”

“Outerbridge,” Owen said. “Call it Outerbridge.”

“That’s not the game,” Jimmy grinned, and damn if his smile wasn’t dazzling.

Anyone would fall in love with this guy, anyone, man, woman, or dog, he was so damn attractive and warm, it made Owen want to walk away and forget about Jenna completely. “The game is everything, Mooncalf. It doesn’t matter what things are. You shape them into the way you want them. That’s how you gain mastery.”

“Mastery’s the thing,” Owen said, faking a sort of blissful — and very nearly nonchalant — take on all of it.

I’ll beat you, he thought as he watched his rival, this apollonian boy with his golden hair and squinty green eyes and the way he had arrogance that was absolutely seductive.

I will beat you, Owen made the oath then and there. He glanced briefly up at the unfettered sun and prayed that if nothing else went his way in this life, he would beat down this Jimmy.

Then, Owen reached out and gave Jimmy’s shoulder a friendly squeeze. “Just not big on games I guess.”

Jenna laughed, “Owen, the game is called Paradise. You rename everything to your liking. Jimmy invented it. Isn’t it...marvelous?” She pecked the bastard on his ear. Owen noted: the kiss went to his earlobe, and Jimmy barely had an earlobe. His ear was smooth and rounded and touched down right behind one of his several dimples.

Jimmy laughed, shrugging, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her close to him. “Let’s call the island Sea Biscuit.”

“No,” Jenna groaned. “That’s terrible. Terrible. Owen, you name it.”

“Outerbridge,” Owen said.

It was noon, and they were at the jetty. The sailboat bobbed gently with the current, and Owen finally took his baseball cap off.

“There now,” Jimmy said, approvingly. “You look less like a little boy than like a man. The Mooncalf has such pretty hair for a moody guy.” He reached over and scruffed his hand through Owen’s hair. His fingers felt electric. “I know the name for this island. I know. It’s called Bermuda. We’re in Bermuda,” he laughed, leaning into Jenna, kissing her just behind her ear.

No, Owen thought. You’re in the realm of Dagon.

8

A restless night came to him, and then another and another. He lay on his single bed, sheets pulled back, and a fever such as he had never before felt washed over him.

Whosoever has loved the way I love Jenna Montgomery, he whispered to the stars through his bedroom window, has known sacrifice and torture and days and nights of endless wanting, thirst without satisfaction, hunger without morsel. Whosoever has wept within themselves for what they could not reach, could not touch, has felt what I feel.

Whosoever has spent his life working his body, mind, and soul to its absolute limit to be the extreme candidate for the love of a beautiful and angelic girl as I have for her, as I have given myself to the shape that she would long for...

That man would not rest were a rival to steal the prize from him.

Dagon, he whispered soundlessly. Dagon. My god. Bring her to me.

Eventually, Owen Crites slept better imagining the world under the sea where the people who were part of Dagon had dwelt, with their vast and imperious citadels, their large cold eyes and their wet shapeless forms, and he imagined the great sacrifice he would throw to them for their entertainment.

9

“How are you going to waste your last summer?” Owen’s mother asked as she switched off the faucet, plunging her hands back into the soapy water.

“Now, don’t blot, Owen, dry. There’s a difference.” She passed him the first dish, which he sprayed down and then wiped with the green-and-white hand towel. The kitchen in the caretaker’s house was as narrow as one of the closets in the big house; but the window looked out on a small sunken garden; behind which, the pine trees stuck out like crooked teeth. “Don’t blot,” his mother repeated.

Owen began stacking the dry plates carefully. “I need a job.”

“You work for your father.”

“Not this summer,” he replied. “Hank’ll do without me.”

“Hank?” his mother said, nearly laughing. “Hank? Next you’ll be calling me Trudy.” Then, her mood darkened. “Show some respect.” His mother reached down to pull the plug on the drain. She reached back to her hairpins, pulling them out so that her gray-streaked hair fell along her shoulders. She smoothed it back, and turned to watch him dry the rest of the plates and bowls from supper. “I know what you’re thinking.”

He glanced at her for the barest moment.

“You’re thinking that you’ll work down where she goes at night. The restaurant. The dock. You’ll be there for the dances. I’ve seen the boys working at those places. They live here all year ’round. But in the summer, sometimes they get the rich girls. But those girls don’t care about them. The boys are just part of summer to those girls. Just like the beach. Just like a walk.”

He remained silent, and kept his eyes on each bowl as he carefully wiped the towel through them.

“I grew up in her world. I know what she’d have to give up. Don’t ask her to do it. Not if you care about her,” his mother said. Then, she nearly snickered.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“I remember your father at your age, is all. I remember him so well,” she said. “He’s working on the pump now. The pump and the well. Today he worked on the azaleas and the roses. Tomorrow, he’ll probably check the pool. If I had only known then. Owen, you might as well go find that pirate treasure as think that a girl like that will be interested in you beyond these summerish flings.”

Owen dropped the towel on top of the cutting board, and turned to walk away. "I know what you get up to," his mother called to him, but he had already stepped out of the house, letting the screen door swing lazily shut. "You're nearly a man, Owen. You need to grow out of all your imaginings now."

Her voice, behind him, was part of another layer of existence. The smell of fresh grass mingled with the slight scent of the roses which were just blooming in spirals and curves up on the bluffs.

He walked to the edge of the hill, feeling the late sun stroke him like a warm hand. At the rim of the koi pond, he knelt down and looked at his reflection in the green water. Soon, the patchwork fish came to the surface. He reached his hand into the murkiness, shivering with the chill, and found the god laying where he'd left it, behind the lava rocks.

He felt the edge of the god's face.

10

In a school notebook, Owen wrote:

Things Jenna likes.

1. She loves swing dancing.
2. She likes expensive perfume. The kind older women wear. Not like other girls.
3. She likes sandals.
4. She likes to let a boy open a door for her.
5. She likes clothes from Manhattan.
6. She likes to be complimented on how smart she is.
7. She likes someone who listens to her.
8. She likes holding hands.

Things Jenna hates:

1. She hates heavy metal rock.
2. She hates boys who look at her breasts.
3. She hates having to wait for anything. Ever.
4. She hates Julia Roberts movies. She reminds me of movie stars though.
5. She hates when animals get hurt.
6. She hates being treated like a piece of meat.
7. She hates boys who want to go all the way because she told me three years ago that she's going to wait for the right one.

8. She hates having to do things she hates.

11

He waited a week before going back up to the Montgomery place, and even then, it was after eleven, and the house was dark and silent except for the kitchen, where Mrs. M always kept a light on. At first, he intended to stand beneath Jenna's bedroom window and maybe toss a pebble at it to get her attention. He noticed that the window — on the third story — was open, and he decided he'd call to her.

Then, he noticed that one of the guest room windows was open, too.

That would be Jimmy's. The bastard.

Owen glanced along the trellis and gutters, and decided he'd try that route first. He climbed the trellis with the agility of a monkey, although it threatened to pull away if he didn't balance his weight just right. It wasn't much different from the rope climb in gym. When he worried that he wouldn't make it to the third story roof, he remembered the breathing trick and began inhaling and exhaling carefully. That was where the balance was: in the breathing. Then, he grabbed the raingutter, and scaled the slant of the roof. He crawled along it, slowly, cautiously, and went to look in on Jenna

while she slept. He felt himself grow hard, imagining how he could hold her while she slept, imagining how he would smell her hair.

When he looked through the open window, he saw the other boy there, Jimmy, in bed with her, holding her, moving against her.

Owen caught his breath and held it for what felt like the longest time. He could hold his breath under water for a few minutes, and holding it now while he watched Jimmy press himself into her, like a hummingbird jabbing at a flower, but not as pretty, just dark and murky, Jimmy's body rising and falling as he plunged into her, not gently the way she would want it, but like he was a jackal tearing apart some carcass.

Chapter Three

The morning swim

1

“The Salty Dog,” Owen said, lifting himself from the swimming pool. “Waiting tables. Since Memorial Day weekend. Lifting weights, too.”

“That must be delightful,” Mrs. M said. She stood near the changing rooms, swathed in a red bathrobe, dark glasses covering her eyes. She looked like a movie star. She had a cigarette in her hand, which she waved dramatically. “I imagine you meet lots of girls and boys your age at that dive.”

“Some.”

“You’re still very young for your age,” she said, and then caught her breath for a moment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that in a negative way. I meant

it as...as...you're so innocent compared to the boys at that school she goes to.

They've already begun those patterns they'll have for life." She exhaled a lungful of smoke. She was like a beautiful dragon, he thought. A jade dragon with sparkling eyes.

Owen drew himself up the rest of the way over the pool's edge. He exhaled deeply; coughing.

"My smoking bother you?"

"No," he said, swiveling to sit down more comfortably, his legs still in the water. "Just holding my breath. Trying, anyway."

"Trying to reach some goal? Underwater?" She took her sunglasses off, and dropped them carelessly on the tile.

He nodded. "To beat the Guinness Book of World Records. This guy, he held his breath. Thirteen minutes."

"That's impossible." She walked casually over to him. He could see her sapphire bathing suit top, and her sparrowish breasts cupped within it as her robe fell open. She stepped out of her sandals. For a moment, he thought of what she would look like with her suit ripped from chin to thigh, with him pressing into her — no, not him, Jimmy, the way he had torn into Jenna. Mrs M, a smile on her face, could not read his thoughts, he hoped. "No one can hold his breath that long," she said. "It must've been a cheat."

“If you believe in something, maybe you can do impossible stuff, Mrs. M.”

“That’s magical thinking, sweetie. And Mrs. M, good lord.” She laughed, dropping her robe completely. She shimmered. “You’re a man now. You’ll have to start calling people by their first names, Owen. I feel like a schoolmarm when you call me that. Is that what you want me to feel like? A haggish old schoolmarm? I’m forty, not seventy. Catherine. Or Cathy.”

“Oh, yeah, okay,” he said, grinning. “Cathy.”

As she walked along the edge of the pool to the far end, she pulled her hair back and tucked it into her white bathing cap. She lifted her arm in a certain way to him, like a salute. Then, Jenna’s mother dove into the pool, graceful as a mermaid. He watched her do laps while he caught his breath.

2

When he went to shower off, Owen saw the other boy’s towel hanging from the bathroom stall. Steam began to fill the changing room. He pulled his wet trunks down, and tossed them on a chair. He grabbed one of the long white towels that the Montgomerys’ maid kept neatly rolled in the cabinet over the toilet. Then, he walked the narrow hallway to the large shower. All three shower heads were running, and the boy stood there rubbing soap along his

arms, his face frothy with white soap foam. Owen ignored him, stepping beneath the furthest shower head, and grabbed a bar of Ivory from the holder.

“Mooncalf,” Jimmy said, as the foam rinsed from his face. His hair stuck up high on his head. The smell of Ivory soap was overpowering. “Haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“I know,” Owen said, his voice husky. He didn’t feel the way he did in school with the other boys, not with this Jimmy, this eighteen-year-old who he had watched deflower Jenna. He felt disgusted. “Been busy.” He turned his back on Jimmy for the rest of the shower, hoping the other boy would leave to go swim in the pool. But Jimmy toweled off, and began dressing just as Owen turned off the water. He slipped his shorts on, and reached for his t-shirt.

“You’ve been working out a lot. Me, too. I run every morning. I play tennis.”

“Swim,” Owen said. He walked back to the toilet to take a leak.

“Swim?”

“I swim.”

“Ah, a complete sentence out of the Mooncalf,” Jimmy chuckled.

“That’s the first thing I noticed about you, you know.”

Owen said nothing; flushed the toilet. Sat down on one of the chairs, and reached for his shirt.

“You talk in bits of sentences. Well, that and your hair.”

Owen twisted back to look at him, his t-shirt shirt half over his head.

“My hair? What’s your problem?”

“You’ve got pretty hair. It’s soft, too. Most guys’ hair is like bristles.”

“Weirdo,” Owen said, then, “Sleep in the guest room much?” He pulled the shirt down, and then went to grab his socks. Jimmy followed him, sitting down on a short bench.

“No. That bother you?”

“No. It’s weird that her parents don’t care.”

“They don’t. Well, her mother doesn’t. Her father’s still down in the city. And I thought you were hot for Jenna. That’s the third thing I noticed about you.”

“We’re friends. That’s all.”

“Boys can’t just be friends with girls.”

“Okay,” Owen said. He laughed, but it was a fake. It echoed off the turquoise tile and sounded less genuine as it went. He looked at Jimmy, who was watching him with a sort of paternal take — the way Owen’s father would look at him when he didn’t understand him.

“You know, Mooncalf, you comb your hair to the left a little more — make the part slightly higher, and you’d look top drawer. You really would. Your chin’s strong, your body’s in excellent shape. You need to get rid of

these,” Jimmy pointed at Owen’s red t-shirt, “and start wearing some oxford cloths, button-downs. With sleeves. Short sleeves are for kids. It would show your best side. And maybe some khakis. When you grin, don’t show all your teeth.”

“Bite me.”

Jimmy laughed, and reached out, pressing his hand against Owen’s shoulder in what could only be a casual and friendly — even brotherly — gesture. “Good. Some spirit. I’m just trying to help. You look good, but you look too island. You need a little charm. All guys do. Swimming only goes so far, after all.” Jimmy, ever-annoying, kept up the jabber. “I’m not much of a swimmer. I sail, but the idea of water, well, let’s just say I do a passable dog paddle. But you’ve got those biceps. Amazing shoulders for such a Mooncalf runt. Pretty good. How much you bench?”

“Who cares?”

A brief silence.

Then, “I do.”

“Well, not all that much,” Owen said. “I just stack the weights on and push. I don’t notice how much.”

“Don’t notice? My god, sport, you mean to say your goal isn’t the weights?”

Owen shrugged. "I never think about it. I just want to be powerful. I mean strong."

"You said powerful."

"Same thing."

Another brief silence.

"You ever up for tennis?" Jimmy asked.

"Not really."

"I can teach you if you like. It would be fun to play a doubles match one day. Early, before it's too hot. You, me, Jenna, and maybe you could find a friend to bring. We could have a good match. It's always fun to play doubles," Jimmy said. Owen noticed the combination of arrogance and nonchalance, as if none of this mattered. Even this small talk was something to fill some empty space. Jimmy probably screwed Jenna on a nightly basis. But he never thought about Owen, or Owen and Jenna. He probably lived in the moment. Completely.

"Saturday should be fun," Jimmy said, wiping the last of the spray from his shoulders as he pushed his feet into the cheapest sneakers that Owen had ever seen. "You bringing a date?"

Owen glanced up. "Her birthday?"

“Yeah, you know, the whole crowd’s coming from the Cape, and then we’ll just do tequila shots til dawn. You got a girl off-island?”

Owen began to lie, just to fill that emptiness between them. Yes, he had a girl. Yes, he was excited about Jenna’s birthday party, even though he had not been invited to it. Yes, he was considering his options as to which colleges he was looking into — Middlebury looked promising, he didn’t think he had quite the grades for Harvard, but his uncle had been a Dean at Middlebury, and yes, they could all go skiing in the winter up there in some distant holiday. The whole time, Jimmy reached into his shaving kit; went over to shave at the mirror, and then applied some kind of lotion to his face. He finished it off with a spritz of the most obnoxious cologne that Owen had ever smelled. While they small-talked it, Owen knew, standing there in the diminishing steam of the changing room, he knew.

Owen knew just by standing there with Jimmy in the shimmering mist.

Jimmy had a weakness.

He began spending time, after that, thinking about that weakness.

Thinking about how he could get Jenna back.

3

Owen's shift at the Salty Dog began at three and lasted until eleven, six days a week. He emerged sweaty and stinking of grease, because half his job was cleaning out the fryers and grease pits at the end of the night, and when he got off shift in early July — it was nearly two a.m. — he went down to the jetty to stare out at the early morning mist of the Sound, smoke some cigarettes, and chill.

He didn't turn around when he heard the footsteps coming up behind him.

"Mooncalf."

"Hey Jimmy."

"Got a cig?"

"Take one," Owen tossed a cigarette back.

"Thanks. I guess you want to be alone."

"Didn't know you smoked."

"I don't. Not when anyone looks, anyway."

"That's nice. Anything else you do when no one's looking?"

"If I told, you'd know my secrets."

“How’s Jenna?”

“She’s okay. She fell asleep early. I just needed to wander a little. How’s the job?”

“Good. You can smell it on me. You wander late. It’s almost morning.”

“In Manhattan, I wander at all hours. I like this time of night. I kind of miss work. I used to work summers in one of my dad’s stores. It was fun sometimes.”

“Seems like more fun to run around the island all summer. Like you two.”

“It gets old. I take that back. Yeah, it’s fun. I guess you want to be left alone.”

“You guessed right,” Owen said, cricking his neck to the left a bit.

“Your neck hurt?”

“It gets stiff. Leaning over a mop half the time. On my knees cleaning up all kinds of shit.”

“Here,” Jimmy said, and Owen felt hands at the back of his neck, gently massaging. “Better?”

Owen let him continue. “This fog depresses me.”

“I think it’s peaceful.”

“You would.”

“Mooncalf, you hate me, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

“How does this feel?” Jimmy pressed his thumbs into Owen’s shoulders.

“Oh yeah,” Owen said. “Right there.”

4

Before dawn, he had gone to the pond. He knelt down beside it, and reached down among the algae and slimy rocks until he found it.

He drew the statue up, and set it down on the wet grass.

“I guess you’re just made up,” he said aloud. “I guess I’m just a screwed up guy who made you up. Maybe when I was twelve I was warped. But you’re just some cheap souvenir someone lost. No one believes in gods.”

But still, the itchy thought touched him somewhere between his eyes and scalp — he could practically feel the fire crawling on him.

But if you’re not.

If you’re real.

I’ll do what needs to be done.

5

Mrs. M, in her own words:

Here's what I thought of it all: my daughter Jenna had been trouble from the day she was born. She was pretty and plain at the same time, and I say that as a loving mother. She inherited her father's face, not much of mine, although I guess she got my eyes. Lucky her — my least favorite feature since my own mother always told me I had sad eyes. When Jenna was four years old, she told me that no man was going to do to her what her Daddy did to me.

Definitely wise beyond her years, but just not special enough to handle what life would deliver to her, that's for damn sure.

It was her trust fund. It made her trouble.

Look, there's something that everyone pussyfoots around but no one ever talks about. That's money. Pure and simple. Money. When a girl has some, she can be elevated to the status of goddess. The most ordinary — even homely — creature can become ravishing with just a portfolio or a trust fund. That island — in summer — is full of trust fund widows who should by all rights be considered blemishes, but instead are constantly sought out for parties and gatherings and literary events. For Jenna, there's always been money. And

I've watched it feed her in a way that can't be healthy; but what could I do?

She has access to money. Lots of money. Money clothes her.

She was ruined because of it, basically. She could never learn how to survive. She could never learn how to rely on herself and her own character to get through a difficult or challenging situation.

She could always buy her way out of things.

This isn't true of me. I was raised solidly middle-class. My father had died when I was six, and my mother didn't have too many options, not back then. In many ways, I feel for Owen because of this. His life is a lot like mine was as a child. Yes, there was some inheritance later for me, but when you spend most of your childhood wanting things you never really get over it.

And money becomes a prison, too. When you know what it's like to live without it, and when it's within your grasp, then you know what it's like to not have it.

So, you cling to it. Pure and simple. You hang on for dear life.

I suppose people will say things about my marriage to Frank that reflect this, but my marriage is a different kettle of fish. We've got our way of living, and yes, you can assail it all you want, but it works for us nine times out of ten, and those times when it doesn't quite work, well, we have places to go where he

can live his life and I can live mine, and the breather is well-needed. On both our parts.

I'm not the easiest woman in the world to live with.

And he's no saint.

I sat down with my little girl when she was just learning about sex, and I told her that men have different ways of dealing with love, and usually it's through the one part of their body that seems to cause others the most damage. "But it's just his body," I told her. She cried over all of this. She cried when she found out her father had another woman. A mistress. But you have to cry at first, don't you? To get all those little fairy tales out of your head about how life gets lived, about how there are a few good men, how some men don't cheat.

And it's not true. All men cheat, and all women marry cheaters, and to not look at that square in the face is like not looking at the good side of marriage, too.

So she cried off and on for a few years, and I held her sometimes; I was cold to her at times — I knew she needed to work this idea out in her mind.

When she fell in love for the first time, she told me that she was grateful for what she'd had to go through with her father. "I don't know why men do what they do," she told me.

“If you did, you’d have solved the greatest mystery of life,” I said to her. Or something like that.

But for my money, she should’ve avoided that Jimmy McTeague. He was bad news. I know every little deb and sorority girl east of the Mississippi thought he was just the end of the world, but they were such goofy little virgins it was hard to have patience with them.

Jimmy McTeague is the devil incarnate. I know that’s an over-the-top way of putting it. He wasn’t evil, but he was cold. I knew a little about his family, and none of it was very good. His father had some bad business deals going, and even if he had all the stores, Frank told me some things that alarmed me.

With Jimmy, I felt it the first day I met him, which was sometime before summer. Perhaps some Easter break? She brought him by the house in Greenwich, and the first thing out of his mouth was, “Hello Catherine. I’ve heard so much about you, I almost feel like we’ve had an affair.”

He thought that kind of thing was funny, that off-the-cuff jokiness. Within minutes, he’d given me some nickname, which of course he had to repeat five or ten times to truly annoy me, and within an hour of chatting with him, I knew more about that boy than I cared to know.

He is dangerous.

And so yes, I think it all has more to do with Jimmy McTeague than with anybody. At her birthday party in late July, he told me that he thought the world was meant to be owned by people like him.

I believe those were his exact words.

Yes, he had money. Yes, he was extremely good looking for a boy his age. Extremely. Only a fool wouldn't notice that. But he had no spirit. What he had was pure badness. He was absolutely pure in his badness.

I once had a dog like that. Beautiful. Completely bad.

Jimmy McTeague's like that.

I really began to hate that boy at Jenna's birthday party.

Chapter Four

The birthday party

1

In the mirror, Owen combed his hair, parting it a bit higher, not to the middle of his forehead, but certainly an inch higher than his usual. He also brushed it back so it rose a bit higher. The summer blond-streaks looked better this way. He rubbed some gel into it, and made sure the part was clean. He smiled as naturally as he could. No, that wasn't right. He let his lips pull back slightly. He squinted his eyes the way that Jimmy did. It looked rich to do it. Like the sun was always on his face, even on a cloudy day.

Then, he rubbed some of his mother's Neutrogena face lotion on his face. It brought a shine to his cheeks and nose. He wasn't sure if he liked it, but it seemed to be what the rich boys had. That shine.

Hanging on the bathroom door: the crisp J Crew shirt, pale blue, the tan chinos. He dressed, and then returned to his bedroom to get the gift he'd wrapped that morning.

"You're not going to that party," his mother said, glancing at his father. Both sat in the small living room in the dark, the television providing the only source of light. Their faces flickered. His father laughed. "Oh, he'll have fun. The kids are really going to mix it up."

"Yeah. It'll be fun."

"You're not one of them," his mother said. "You can pretend. You always pretend." Then, she turned to his father, patting his shoulder. "Well?"

"Leave it alone, Boston," his father said. "It's the kids' party. You used to go to parties."

"What's that you've got there?" his mother asked. She got up from the couch, setting her beer down on the coffee table. His father reached over, turning on the standing lamp. Light came up. His mother looked gray, despite the fact that she colored her hair. Even her skin seemed gray. His father looked

like a wisp of smoke. It was all Owen could do to keep them from vanishing within the room.

Owen looked down at the box in his hands. "It's her birthday."

"You bought her something?" his mother asked, a grin spreading like blood on her face. He could imagine her dead, her skull cracked open like an egg. "You bought the Montgomery girl something? Working for tips at the Salty Dog and you bought the richest girl in the world something?" She shook her head gently. "Owen, you're always trying to impress someone with what you don't have." She said this sweetly, and he felt a twinge of love for her then. He almost felt bad for what he'd done. He almost felt bad for what he'd stolen from his mother to put in the box.

He almost felt bad for what he was giving Jenna.

Almost.

2

The party was in full swing by ten at night. Every Nancy, every Skip, every Jess and Sloan, they all were there, poolside. The great curtains were drawn back, and the glass doors had been removed for the party. White tents had been erected along the yard; lanterns of every conceivable hue strung along the walkway to the Montgomery place, and balloons flew with some regularity

from the back acre. The smell of cigarettes and perfume and gin and beer and money were there, too.

Watching it, you'd have seen nearly fifty teenagers dancing, laughing, shouting, a tall blond girl with flowing hair and limbs soaked from having been thrown into the swimming pool, the fat drunk frat boy vomiting over by the birdbath, half-a-dozen homely young women shining under the spotlight of boy's gazes — for lust and money and breeding and privilege all attract beyond mere looks. The Sound sparkled with moonlight, and summer was at its peak, the sun had only just gone down an hour before, and the smell of salt sea air mingled with the foam of mermaids' souls, lost from true love.

All these things Owen thought.

3

“Did you see Jimmy at the nationals? God, I hear he's going to be at Wimbledon someday. Soon.”

“If he's at Harvard —”

“When he's at Harvard, I'm going to call him Jimmy McTeague of the Ivy League. Isn't that cute?”

“I think what's cute is his father. Have you ever met him?”

“Well, I've been in the store.”

“Sports superstores never interested me. It seems crass to sell that kind of thing.”

“I read in *Forbes* that his dad is worth several billion.”

“Dead or alive?”

“Dead; then Jimmy’s worth that.”

“Jimmy McTeague is shallow. He is. He’s not smart either,” one deb said, her party dress ruined because someone spilled a Bloody Mary down the front. “He’s pretty but he’s dumb. And my uncle went to Yale with his father, and let me tell you, that man was nearly kicked out for cheating and once that kind of thing happens, you never know.”

Owen stood back, beyond the lights that had been set up along the tents, and watched them all.

The small gift in its box, in his trembling hands.

“Smooth. Just be smooth,” he whispered to himself.

He wanted to make sure Jenna saw the gift.

Saw what it meant.

4

Jimmy McTeague held onto a bourbon and water as if for dear life, and he laughed with his jock friends, and he eyed the other girls, and he thanked

Mrs. Montgomery for the excellent whiskey. “People who have whiskey like this should own the world,” and even when he said it, he didn’t know what it meant; and when he saw Owen standing just at the edge of the party, he raised his glass and shouted, “Yo, Mooncalf, get your ass over here!”

5

Jenna Montgomery, in her own words:

Here are things I’ve read about and I really believe:

The happiest of people don’t necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the most of everything that comes along their way.

Happiness lies for those who cry, those who hurt, those who have searched, and those who have tried, for only they can appreciate the importance of people who have touched their lives.

Love begins with a smile, grows with a kiss and ends with a tear.

The brightest future will always be based on a forgotten past, you can’t go on well in life until you let go of your past failures and heartaches.

Okay, before you think I’m just some rich bitch who gets sentimental and gooey over romance novels, the reason I think about those things is because

when you are beautiful and you have money, it's those simple things you have to remember.

And I was pretty happy for the most part, right up until summer.

This probably began because Daddy didn't want me to open Montgomery Hill on Memorial Day like we always did. Mom was already up there, a week or two early, and I'd only just come home from finals.

I have always gone to Outerbridge Island since I was about four, and I never miss a summer there. It's what I look forward to after a tough year in school, and since I would turn eighteen over the summer and I had just finished school — but I'd be entering Sarah Lawrence in September — I really wanted to enjoy what time I had left to just be a kid.

Daddy was in one of his moods, though, and I suspect that woman he knows was part of it. Mom told me all about that woman when she gave me the speech about sex and life and marriage when I was fourteen. "Men have problems with their bodies," she said, looking only a little embarrassed. "They all cheat. It's just something we put up with if we can. It's nothing about love.

Don't even think that. It's just their biology. They have their good sides and their bad sides. And there are plenty of bad women, too," she added. "Like that woman."

That woman lived in Brooklyn, in a brownstone that my father had bought for her in the 1970s. I took the subway out to it once, and stood on the steps in front, looking through the windows. That woman had a nice chandelier and some paintings on the walls but it was a fairly plain house in Park Slope. I sort of think I saw a little of her, too, walking up the street. She wasn't even pretty, which was sort of what amazed me. She wasn't like my mother. She was tall, with big feet, and red hair that needed some kind of style. Her face was nothing like my mothers, nothing like the women I knew; she looked sort of round and plain.

I don't really know if it was that woman I saw, but I suspect it was.

So, just after high school graduation, I was all ready to go to the island, but Daddy was just moody and told me that I needed to stay because of Jimmy, who was supposed to have been in town.

All right, Jimmy McTeague. He's a tennis player who goes to Wimbledon every year, he's practically a National champion, and his father owns McTeague Sports, the chain, although I never understand why they don't have stores in Manhattan. I met Jimmy when he was at Exeter, at some dance, and I was just thinking he was cute. Marnie called him the Leech for some reason which I didn't quite understand, but I knew there was something interesting about him. He lived a different life than me, and I never really saw

myself with that kind of Midwestern jock-type. He was always sweating, too, which I guess goes with the whole athletic thing, but not something that's pleasant to be around an hour after a match.

Still, by the time I was seventeen, I really liked Jimmy. And no, I had no thoughts of marriage or anything like that. We hadn't actually even been intimate or anything, just held hands a lot and went to dances and out to dinner. When I debuted, Jimmy shared the drudgery of that awful debutante season by being my escort; when I was really pissed off over not getting into Columbia, Jimmy actually flew in from the West Coast — where he had some important tennis match — and took me out to dinner.

Then, the night after I would normally go to the island, Jimmy told me we could sail there in this little boat he kept in Greenwich at the club. And that first night on the boat, I became a woman. We drank too many glasses of Chardonnay, and one thing led to another. Jimmy was never very aggressive in bed. He was kind of shy that way. So I pretty much had to seduce him, but once we both closed our eyes and let our bodies take over, we knew how to make love.

And it really was love. It really was. I felt it. We spent that first night on the boat. We got into the harbor at about twelve or one in the morning, and just slept together in the little bed. He snored sweetly. Not a hacking or

sawing snore, but like a puppy dreaming. He did say something funny to me in the morning, something that struck me as odd, something about how maybe now we could think more about the future now that we'd mated, and I laughed at him and he looked a little angry when I laughed.

All right, I knew that maybe there would be trouble with Owen when I saw him on the jetty when we got off the boat the next day. He looked like he'd been waiting there all night.

Like he'd been watching us.

The little turd. He really was. I care a lot for him, of course. We've known each other since we were both kids. He's the son of the gardener. His mother sometimes helps out with parties and laundry and other things. He's cute, which helps, too, because although I have nothing against boys that aren't very good looking, there's something about a good looking one that just makes you want him around all the time.

So I'm barely dressed, some tacky beach towel around me basically, and there's Owen at the shore seeing both of us coming up from the boat and the first thing he says to me is, "What happened?"

I felt all nervous and even giggly like I needed a cigarette. I told him I didn't want to see my mother for a day or two. And then Jimmy just took over, like he always does. He has this way with guys — he always gets them on

his side. Jimmy gave him a nickname and acted like Owen was Jimmy's kid brother and they just seemed to get along fine. It was like they'd known each other all their lives, in about five minutes. Owen seemed to like all the ribbing and you know that sort of adolescent boy-talk they do. You know that. That way boys have of getting together and sort of sparring, and talking, and noticing each other's hair, or how one of them is sad, and they either peck it to death or get all brotherly. I saw it with Jimmy and his best friends at Exeter, too. The way they played like puppies. That's just what it was like — like watching two golden retrievers wrestle over a bone.

I didn't see Owen much during June. I guess he got the job down in town. Sometimes I saw him when we went to the Salty Dog, but he never waited on our table. Jimmy was virtually attached at the hip with me, which can get annoying no matter how much you care for a guy. I used to try and lose him in the mornings, after he'd go off to play his beloved tennis with one of the local pros or with my mother. My mother is excellent at sports, which are pretty much not my thing. I like golf a little, and sometimes I like to swim, but the whole girl-jock thing is beyond me.

So Jimmy would slip out of bed, and I'd get dressed and go down to visit Marci and Elaine, and Elaine's brother, Cooper, down island. Sometimes we'd take whole after- noons just having brunch, or wandering the Cove by the

Great Salt Pond. Jimmy would get all pissed off at me. He was a little jealous. Well, a little more than jealous. He thought that since he was the first guy I'd slept with that he somehow should've had more ownership of me. Or maybe I should've been more attached to him. I mean, I was attached. And he was, technically, the first guy I'd slept with, although I let Ricky Hofstedter press his fingers up there sophomore year, and then there was that time that I got drunk at Hollis Ownby's party and wound up making out with Harvey Somebody (he was a Somebody. I just can't remember his last name) until I woke up with a hangover and a major pain down there and I hoped it hadn't gone too far beyond basic, you know, petting.

But Jimmy had all these needs, and some days, particularly in June and early July, I just wanted to chill and hang out with some friends without worrying about whether I was paying attention to Jimmy and all his issues.

I didn't think of Owen much except sometimes I remembered how much fun he was when I was younger and exploring the beaches, or how I'd take him out in one of my dad's small boats, and he'd tell me all about his plans. How he was going to slowly start investing in stocks. I'd ask him how? And he'd look at me funny, and laugh. Then, he'd tell me how his mother's father had been well-off and then when Owen turned twenty-one, he'd come into a trust fund. I knew he was lying, but I sort of liked his lies. They made

the days go by. Sometimes the summer seemed short when I was around him, and by the time I got back to school in the fall, I felt renewed. I owed a lot of that to Owen.

But this summer, I've been distant from everybody. Part of it is Jimmy. And yes, it's sexual, I guess. But since I'm paying you by the hour, I'd guess that you're okay with me telling you, right? Well, Jimmy seems to not be all that aggressive in bed. I know that must sound weird since I'm not terribly experienced in that arena, either, but I've watched movies, I've read books, and I talk with my girlfriends about this stuff. This isn't like twenty years ago when no one ever talked about sex. My friends all say their boyfriends seem to put the moves on them constantly. With Jimmy, I have to literally reach down and grab him. And then, he just sort of you know touches me here and there and then he — well you know — and then it's over and sort of unpleasant even though it's not ghastly or anything. It's just not what I expected.

And then there was that fiasco with my birthday party. Christ, it was embarrassing. Mind if I light up? I'm hungry for nicotine at the moment.

Ravering.

Ah, that's better. I know everyone has to give up smoking at some point in their lives, but how nice to not have to give it up just yet.

So, the seventeenth was my big party, and I didn't even want Owen there — he didn't fit in with Jimmy's friends, and many of my friends found him a little cold. Plus, there was the whole problem of his mother, who's a force to be reckoned with. She's always looking at me like I'm the Whore of Babylon. She was helping us set up the party, and she kept giving me that look. You know that look. That mother look.

But Owen showed, and frankly, I was happy to see him. It was sort of a relief since I'd barely seen him all summer. Well, I saw him when he went swimming. In our pool of course. In our pool. I called him Leech (funny that he and Jimmy both have been called that, huh?) when he wasn't around because he really is such a leech. I mean it in a funny nice way, not some awful way. I once slipped off a rock into one of the little ponds on the property, and my legs were covered with leeches. They don't hurt. You'd be surprised at that, wouldn't you? You'd think that something that sucks your blood would hurt, but they don't. It's just the fact that they're there that makes them bothersome.

So it was my little joke: calling Owen Leech. I care a lot for Owen, actually. We grew up together practically. My island boy. My father laughs whenever I call Owen Leech behind his back, but my mother, well, she doesn't understand that kind of humor. That ironic kind of humor. I mean it as an

affectionate term. Sort of like the way Jimmy calls him Mooncalf. It's a name. I guess it distances me from him or something. But it does get annoying when someone is always borrowing things or using your things or assuming things just because his father works in the garden. I like them. They're like family. I feel a lot for Owen, but really, he should've gotten over that Leech thing years ago.

I can hear my mother's voice in my head: that's cruel, Jenna. I know. I know. I get accused of cruelty all the time. Not physical cruelty. My mother means it's cruel to fault poor people with using our things.

My mother has this thing for him. Well, for all young men. She won't acknowledge it, and she thinks Daddy's the bad one, but I know she likes the boys who hang around me. And no, I'm not jealous of her. Why should I be? She's old. Her time has come and gone. My time is only just beginning.

Anyway, eighteen year old boys do not want forty year old women. It's embarrassing, really.

Even at the party, Mom is sauntering around in that green getup she has that looks too glitzy for the island. We all go casual here, so she looked like too much like Ginger on Gilligan's Island — too done up. Too too, as Missy Capshaw says. She's too too.

Missy came down from the Vineyard, and Shottsy had his cousin Alec with him, and pretty much the whole gang was there, except for the Faulkners who all went to Maine for the summer. I guess about sixteen of my friends came, and then six or seven of Jimmy's, and then Owen with his shirt that was so new it still had the wrinkles from the cardboard box, and Shottsy made a big point of letting everyone know that part of the plastic collar liner was still under the collar. Owen brought me this nice little gift, I mean that in an ironical way, and that's really the issue here.

But I was having some margaritas and just getting sort of high, and Marnie Llewellyn was regaling me with that story again, the one about her brother's professor and how him and two female students had gone off to Fenwick together and then got caught in the worst way, the very worst way possible.

And I saw what Owen was doing.

I saw that he had already cast a spell. Some kind of spell. Just like a witch.

Over Jimmy.

I saw Jimmy put his hand in Owen's hair, and I saw how they laughed, and I know it must seem irrational and paranoid, but the first thing I thought was:

That bastard is trying to steal my boyfriend.

You can imagine how I felt. I mean, I thought it was ludicrous. It wasn't like Skippy Marshall and that Donovan character from Harrow — they were both homosexual, and we all had known it since they got into the drama club and developed the perfect butts in the workout room doing squats.

This was different.

I thought it was absolutely ludicrous. But I grew livid as I watched them. Absolutely livid. Really, from the corner of my eye. I was working on my third or fourth margarita, and Missy kept talking and Alec kept eyeing my breasts like he always did, and I had my little circle, but they knew something was up, too. They knew that Jimmy was not fawning on me, and I didn't really enjoy that. Frankly.

I suppose if I had not been drinking, I wouldn't have caused a scene. But I kept my eye on the two of them, and I saw the touches.

Yes, that's right. Queerish little touches. Not the kind that boys do. Not normally. Owen touched Jimmy's elbow, and Jimmy looked at Owen's hand. And they laughed, and whenever one of them could, he took his fist and gently patted the other on the chest. Like old chums, yes, maybe. Certainly

that's what I'd like to believe, but in fact, I saw Jimmy show him more genuine attention, not that needy attention he showed me, but the kind of attention every girl wants but never gets from a boy. That adoration kind of attention.

And Owen was milking it. I know he was. I asked Marnie later on, and she said I was imagining things, that Jimmy had been bedding girls since eighth grade, that it was just that boy thing. That's what she said, "That prep school boy thing where they get together and they touch each other and they tell dirty jokes and they check each other out. It's because they both want you. They need to check out the competition," she said.

But I don't know. I stood there, feeling embarrassed and humiliated, and at my party.

At my own party.

Finally I couldn't stand it.

Jimmy leaned forward and whispered something to him. It was like slow motion. I can remember it now like it's still in front of my face. I saw his lips move as he whispered, and I saw Owen lean into him, and Jimmy's hand was on Owen's shoulder, and maybe I was hallucinating or maybe I saw what I saw, but I think Jimmy McTeague placed the barest whisper of a kiss on Owen's ear, at my party, with me watching, with me having to bear witness to it. God, it's so gothic. It's so...Fire Island. It really hit me hard.

I began crying, without knowing I was doing it, weeping, just standing there, and Alec took my hand and said, “Aw, princess, what’s up?”

And I shook myself free of that crowd, and I walked right over to those two horrible boys, that horrible Jimmy McTeague and I whispered, “If you embarrass me here, I will destroy you.”

And then, of course, I had to go back to my party.

I had to.

I had an obligation to my friends. I was not going to let the boy who had been sleeping with me for nearly two months humiliate me in front of my friends.

It wasn’t until the next morning that I opened the gift that Owen had given me, and that’s pretty much why I freaked out, with my usual panache. I didn’t want to see Owen again.

Ever.

But I knew that Jimmy would still be mine, no matter what we both went through to be together.

After all, remember these things:

The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the most of everything that comes along their way.

Happiness lies for those who cry, those who hurt, those who have searched, and those who have tried, for only they can appreciate the importance of people who have touched their lives.

Love begins with a smile, grows with a kiss and ends with a tear.

The brightest future will always be based on a forgotten past, you can't go on well in life until you let go of your past failures and heartaches.

When I think of all I've had to deal with, particularly with Jimmy, these words bring me comfort.

Oh yeah, what Owen gave me for my birthday.

It was a gun. A crap-ass gun at that. It was tiny. It had some pearly kind of handle, and the safety looked like it had rusted out, and I couldn't get the little clippy thingy off if I tried. I thought it was a joke at first, but I guess not.

It looks like something that you'd buy from some little old lady in Brooklyn, some little old lady with a thousand cats and one of those old fox furs who chainsmokes and lives in a studio she's had since the 1950s.

Still, it was a gun, and I have to admit, it was the creepiest thing he could've given me.

He scares me a little.

I mean, what kind of psycho gift is that?

Chapter Five

After the party

1

Jimmy grabbed Owen's elbow, laughing, the smell of beer and tequila mixed in the air, and Owen giggled, too, and said, "Let's go to the jetty. It's beautiful there. You can see the north star."

"You know the north star?"

"Yeah. I know all the stars. I'm an islander. I know the dippers and scorpio, too."

"You're a Mooncalf," Jimmy said, his grin big and goofy and not the controlled jock he'd once seemed. "God I wish I knew the stars like you. I want to just — just — look at the stars and know which ones they are, and where the earth is in relation to them."

The party spun around them, and Owen had a vague sense that Jenna's eyes floated around his every move. She'll understand, he thought. Someday, she'll understand.

"She's a bitch," Jimmy whispered, as if reading his thoughts. "She and her friends and half these people here. All these quote unquote friends of mine, of ours, who are they? Damn it, who are they? And Jenna. Christ. Jenna."

"No, she's cool," Owen said. "Let's go. The jetty."

"God yeah, show me the stars," Jimmy said, and he kept saying it over and over again as they stumbled their way down the path along the bluffs, and every now and then Owen stopped and let Jimmy take his hand. Jimmy's hand was warm, and above them, the sounds of the party spun, and the smell of pine and sea mingled.

The moon cut a path for them all the way to the jetty, and by the time they got there, Jimmy had already grabbed Owen hard and pulled him close to him until their chests pressed together, their thighs met, and he pressed his lips to Owen's mouth.

2

Voices in the dark:

"It's all right, I know you. I know what we both want."

“Shut up. Just shut up.”

“Come here. Come here. Let me help you. It’s all right. It feels good.”

“No, not like this. No.”

“I’ve been so lonely.”

“Oh.”

“Wanting this.”

“Oh.”

“Since the first time I saw you.”

“Oh.”

“Does this feel good?”

“Ah.”

“Will you let me take you?”

“Oh.”

“Ask me.”

“Oh.”

“Ask me.”

“Owen, take me? Owen? Take me.”

3

Owen takes control

I had found my way to Jenna.

It wasn't much different than kissing a girl, and once I allowed Jimmy to feel as if he had seduced me, that I was the unwilling partner, it was easy to hold his attention. He told me to close my eyes and pretend he was a girl, to just let him do things to me, to just keep the image of a beautiful girl in my mind while he did things.

Jenna was the only face I saw.

I knew that once I had Jimmy McTeague of the Ivy League in my arms, once I had pressed myself into him, owned him, dominated him, that Jenna would be mine.

I look at the boy that I was then: Owen Crites. Mooncalf.

He mounts the rich boy and he drives his point home.

And no, I'm not gay. I had no thrill from what I did to Jimmy McTeague, how I made him feel tenderness and acceptance and release that night. It felt less like sex to me than stabbing someone over and over while they curl around you.

How I caressed him as no one ever had, to the point that he wept against my chest.

It was purely because I thought of Jenna.

My love for her.

Love is purity.

My next decision, as I lay there with that puppy whispering his soul into my ear, was just how I was going to murder him.

PART TWO

The Last of Summer

Chapter Six

Jimmy McTeague keeps a diary

1

Need to train better. Work on backswing, damn it. Wake up an hour earlier every morning. Run two miles. Then practice. Then row.

July was a waste. Feeling like I'm getting lazy. More strength training. Check out the sucky gym in town.

Jenna's a bitch. She thinks she knows. She doesn't know. She'll never really know.

Need to get back with Jenna. Need to figure this out.

I can't resist him. It's awful what we're doing. But I know I can stop. I know if I just stick with the program I can stop. I think he's evil.

What we did was wrong. I know that. What Jenna and I can build is right.

Call the Padre and Madre for more money.

Become a better person. Quit all the lying. Lying is bad. There's no reason. If you feel the way you feel, let it all out. Don't keep holding it in.

Doesn't matter what dad thinks. Doesn't matter if you know what you need from life. You can let it out. Other people do. Other people need those things, too.

Maybe it's not real. Maybe it's just sex. Maybe I shouldn't let it happen. But now all I think about is him.

Jenna and Mooncalf.

Mooncalf.

He told me something really smart. Just shows that you don't need all these prep schools and universities to be smart. He said, "Love is purity." It is so true. It's something I couldn't say out loud. But it's so true. But there's more to life than love. You can't survive on love. You can't have the important things in life just because of love.

No one pays for three houses and European vacations and clothes from Italy and Rolls Royces with love.

2

My name's Jimmy McTeague. It's safe to assume you know that because you are me sitting here reading my diary. Since after all no one else is going to read this if I can help it. It's also probably safe to assume that you'll burn these pages someday to make sure no one else reads them. But for now, writing it down seems right. My favorite movie is probably still the *Little Mermaid*, which I saw when I was nine years old and I still watch it on video once a year at least. Why? Because it was about sacrifice for what you wanted. I've always sort of believed in that. My dad doesn't understand why I watch a cartoon to inspire me. Sometimes I watch it before a match because it gets me going. I don't see why being smart and grown up has anything to do with abandoning the things you believed in when you were a kid.

I've wanted to keep a diary since I was about nine, about the same time as I saw that movie, but I didn't start til I was twelve, and then I threw it all out, so after another brief attempt at sixteen, I've decided now that I'm about to enter Harvard, it's time for me to keep one. I'm not only about tennis,

anyway. I get tired of that dumb jock image. My SATs were through the roof. I get good grades and am totally wrapped up in Medieval History, which I figure I might pursue even after I graduate. If I graduate. If I make it through. If all the bad things that I've found out about don't happen in the meantime and it all ends.

This part of the diary is about my summer. Jenna and I were having a great year together, although I wasn't always there for her, I suppose, because of the matches I had in England and out in California, and then she spent Spring Break in Aruba, so that last week in May was really our first full week together, which is why I took the Karenina out of the yacht club and we sailed lazily up and down the coast for a few days. I was so pissed off at Dad over a lot of things. First and foremost was the talk he gave me, about how I needed to uphold the family and how I needed to look at life differently, not as a kid but as someone who had responsibilities and wanted to live a certain way with certain kinds of people. I didn't forget about Chip, but I guess that's one of those things I have to put aside. My dad says so anyway. Chip was really aggressive anyway, and the time we spent together wasn't really very meaningful because the whole time I kept thinking to myself: where will this go? Two guys can't marry. I'll lose everything.

And Chip was all about loins, anyway. I shouldn't even write about it here. What if someone finds out? I'm not really gay anyway, I just get in these situations. I suppose I fall in love with people. And Chip turned out bad anyway. All that mess about fighting and arguing and him claiming I broke his arm when I didn't break it and if he fell it was his fault anyway for standing in my way and not letting me pass. He did that sort of blackmail thing too, but I showed him that I wasn't going to put up with that kind of shit.

I fell for Jenna pretty hard. I mean, who wouldn't? She's gorgeous and full of life and her brain is just amazing. And the money. To pretend it's not there is like not noticing her bra size. All the guys seem to want her, and I really had to fight off that bulldog from Choate with the Ferrari, but it wasn't too hard to dazzle her on the courts. She's a big fan of tennis, which helps, and that night we went for a walk back in the city really turned things around for me. I mean, we were walking down Fifth Avenue, and she was talking about what she wanted from life, all the wonderful things, to see the world and experience the best of everything, and how her trust fund was huge and she intended to always have the life her parents had, and my mind was turning a hundred little things around. I was walking with her under cloudy skies, and I was thinking about how this was right. Being with Chip was wrong because it was based on that one thing, that physical thing, and I thought, all right, I

know where this will go with Jenna. We'll marry, we'll have children, we'll build something really solid. She has all this family land and properties and I'm really good at handling investments, so we'll be perfect together. And she wants kids really badly. So badly that she told me she wasn't even all that interested in college, and she wanted to just get out from under her parents and be on her own and make her own life. She has millions from her grandmother, and it's earning more millions every year, she said, so why should she have to go through college? She wanted to do some magazine work, one of those Conde Nast magazines, and her family has huge pull in that area, and she was smart enough.

It hardly bears comparison with a night spent on a dirty mattress in the back of some studio apartment in Chelsea with Chip, who fell on hard times after prep school. That sleaziness he had, like an air, like marijuana smoke in the back of a bus — that's what his place was like. He was slumming, he was degrading himself. His parents had cut him off, and he was willing to live like that. Hardly any furniture, a job that barely paid him per month what a reasonable man can live on. And still, he was willing to live like that for the sake of the feeling in his organ. I am never going to let that happen to me. I am never going to let people know how I am on the inside if I can help it. I got so mad at Chip I guess I ended up roughing him up a little, but he kept trying

to ruin things, and I just won't let anyone do that. My dad is ruining things as it is, and pretty soon other people are going to know how he's ruining things, and I do not intend to be in that spot with him.

I remember clasping Jenna's hand, and listening to her optimistically go on about the life she intended for herself.

So I knew that if I just kept my eyes on her, it would all go in the right direction.

When we made love for the first time, it even felt right. She was overheated on the inside, it was like lava or something, it felt so natural.

I thought it was all right up until I met Mooncalf.

I tried to fight it, too. I looked at him and tried. I tried not to look at his body. So well developed. The way he spoke, almost sullenly. I didn't want him then, but I knew he had it in him to take me over. And I suppose he has.

There's even a dangerousness to him I enjoy. I find myself looking over Jenna's shoulder, when we're at the beach, or bicycling, hoping he's there, just out of reach.

And then, the party. It was like waking up for the first time. It was like knowing that I'd been telling myself lies for years.

That I'd been foolish and wrong.

Now, all I think about is Mooncalf and I wish we were in a different world, not one of secrets and half-truths, but one where we could just be together.

I know he feels the same.

I'm sleeping pretty much on the boat now. I can't stay with Jenna. Not in her room. And her dad gives me those looks, which aren't pleasant, either.

Jenna's been cold. Can't blame her. I know somehow it will all turn out okay. I know it will because I know life is not meant to be bad, and it's not meant to be confusing, and if we can all just get through this summer, it'll somehow work out because life is supposed to work out.

Sometimes, I get so lonely I want to just hold Jenna. As a friend.

I want to see him again, but he's been avoiding me since the party. I've had two weeks now, seeing Jenna and her family, playing a little golf, some tennis, taking the boat out when I can. Jenna's been good about this even if she's turned icy. She seems to handle my silences well. She really is a friend.

I'm glad we can be this close and that she can be so understanding.

Most of the time, she seems to act as if the night of her party never happened, that I didn't go off with him. She won't really understand what it means, anyway. She'll think she'll know, but I'll let her know it was nothing. I'll get her thinking about us again, which is what she really wants, anyway.

Chapter Seven

The hurricane approaches

1

There he is again: I see him. That boy Owen. He's been running down on the beach; swimming too much for his own good; working on his oxygen intake because breathing is the key; and he's felt a strength grow within him to match his body's power.

2

The weeks after the party went by in a blur of moments and flashes in his brain — the sky clouded and then became unbearably sunny, the humidity soared and then dropped and then soared again; a tropical storm to the south

had been upgraded to a hurricane but it would not strike so far north as Outerbridge; and once, in the dead of night, Owen lay in bed convinced he'd heard a gun go off somewhere on the island.

August was like that sometimes.

3

“Owen. Why?”

“Why what?” he asked, shielding his eyes from the sun.

Jenna had emerged from the deck all wrapped in a big yellow towel, and yet to him it was as magnificent as a summer dress. The smell of the pool was intoxicating. He had just finished his morning laps, and felt cleaner and stronger. Chlorine stank on his skin. He looked up at her. He wanted to kiss her; he wanted to touch her. They stood so close.

“Why the gun?”

“It's just a pistol. It's an antique.”

“Why?”

“I thought you'd want it. I thought you'd like it.”

“I'm not a fan of guns.”

“No one is. But it has that inlay. It's mother of pearl. It seems feminine.”

“You must be out of your mind. To give me that as a gift. On my birthday.”

“It was my grandfather’s.”

“Well, I’m giving it back. God, I don’t want it in the house, let alone in my hand.”

“You need protection.”

“From what?”

“Jimmy,” Owen said. He sucked a breath in briefly. It was time to let it begin. He felt a curious shiver sweep through his body, as if he were on the verge of some delightful pleasure. “He told me...”

“Told you what? What did he say? Was it about me?”

Owen paused. He wanted her to feel the words as he said them. He wanted to make sure that she was completely focused on him. On his lips as he spoke. “No, it’s nothing. I just think you should keep the gun.”

“No, he said something,” she nearly snarled. “Tell me.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it,” Owen said.

“It made you think I needed a gun?” she asked. Her face went blank. She looked down at her feet for a moment. Then, she glanced up and looked him in the eye. “What’s been going on between you two?”

“Nothing,” Owen whispered.

“Owen, what’s going on?” she said.

He looked at her and said, “Jenna, I want you to be safe. That’s all. Look, I know you don’t care for me, and that’s fine. I can’t make you like me. And I know I can’t make you...care for me...in a way I happen to care for you. No one is magician enough for that. I’ve thought about you since we were both little kids. I’ve always considered you someone special.”

“What?” she asked in a voice that was barely more than mouse squeak.

“I know that you’ll go on to some really great college and you’ll meet lots of guys like Jimmy and you’ll come back to the island during the summer and be friendly with me but you’ll see me as the island townie who paints houses for a living, or perhaps works on boats. And you’ll have a different life.”

“What is this all getting to —” Jenna gasped, and then her eyes lit up. “You lost the island accent. You talk like one of us now.”

She said it as if it was one of the most dreadful things imaginable. As if the “one of us” was the worst thing that could happen.

“That isn’t true,” Owen said. Then, he glanced away from her, at the house and the beginnings of the roses his father so lovingly tended. “Look, I know I’m nothing to you. Just consider the gun some kind of protection. He’s dangerous.”

He walked away from her, his body barely dry from the swimming pool.

She called after him, but he didn't turn. He walked from the pool to the back lawn, and then disappeared down the path.

4

Another morning, he helped Mr. M with his golf clubs and luggage, driving the truck up from the ferry. Mr. M had almost missed the summer on the island. "Business takes a man over," he told Owen on the way up the hill to the house. He was the biggest man Owen had ever seen — like a bear, but slick, too, and shiny. He had on dark glasses and a rumpled blue oxford cloth shirt; his skin was like pink snow. When Owen got to the door with the last of the bags, Mrs. M (he had to start thinking of her as Cathy if he was going to ever grow up) kissed her husband lightly on the nose.

"How's the summer?"

"Quiet," Mrs. M said.

"Where's that boy?"

"Which?"

"McTeague," Mr. M said.

"I think it's over. She's gone to Dr. Vaughan three times in two weeks.

That's a record for her," Mrs. M said, and then turned to Owen. "Sweetie, can you go grab the mail?"

Owen nodded, feeling far too obedient, feeling his heart beating too fast, feeling too much within his frame, as if his muscles were about to twist and untangle and he was afraid for a moment that he had not heard what he thought he'd heard.

5

Owen sat by the koi pond, absorbing the last of an afternoon sun on one of his days off — the weather had gone back and forth, between brief bouts of showers and then sudden sunbursts. He was about to reach for Dagon beneath the placid green water, when he noticed a shadow reflection move across the water.

He didn't turn, but knew that Jimmy had come up behind him.

"Aren't you ever going to talk to me again?"

Owen shrugged.

"I thought...I thought we could...we could at least be friends," Jimmy said. "I think about you. All the time."

"Don't come here again," Owen measured his words carefully. The shadow withdrew, and Owen had the sun again.

6

Owen lay back in the grass and closed his eyes to the sun. As the violet darkness of his inner mind grew, he began to see the shadow sea of Dagon's realm. From the dusky waves, a form emerged, a magnificent sea god, its eyes round and without mind, like those of a shark, its body slick as oil with thousands of fins sprouting along its back; and as it grew, Owen knew what the god asked of him.

7

"I said peel the potatoes," his mother said, but he could see the look in her eyes. His mother was afraid of him. A little. Just a little fear. That was good.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me," Owen said almost politely, as he lifted the first potato and brought it to the small sharp knife.

"Something's missing in the house," she said, but his mother had begun saying strange things for the past few weeks — sentences that didn't go together, phrases that meant something only in her mind.

“You probably misplaced whatever it is,” he told her almost nonchalantly. “You’ve always been like that, haven’t you?”

8

And then, the storm came.

When storms come to Outerbridge, they usually have lost most of their power, they usually have been downgraded from hurricanes by the time they hit Bermuda to Tropical Storms when they reach Long Island, and by the time they make it past Block Island and start heading to the Avalons, it’s usually high winds and warm rains but not much damage. The islanders who are over sixty remember the storm of ’53 that “took the hats off houses,” as they said, and generally made a mess of the summer homes.

The storm that arrived the last week of August was not a terror, nor did it threaten to take the hats off houses. It was a warm palace of rain and wind and it changed the geometry of the island with its shifts and movements.

The sky became a hardened gray, and the rain was constant, and the koi pond overflowed. Owen ran outside with his father, newspapers curled over their heads, to try and save the fish as they flip-flopped along the mud and grass, their patchwork colors seeming to melt beneath the downpour.

9

Owen was on his way to work, using his father's truck to get to the Salty Dog, when he saw the figure standing in the pouring rain of afternoon down by the docks. Owen pulled the truck to the edge of the road and parked. He got out in the rain, opening his dark umbrella. The smell of fish was overpowering — it was a stink he was used to, but with the storm it was worse.

Jimmy looked otherworldly: he wore a shiny parka, and his face was pale beneath it. He nearly galloped over to Owen, and reached out to touch him on the shoulder, but Owen pulled back. Owen slammed the truck door shut.

"I'm going to work," Owen said.

"Mooncalf?"

"Leave me alone."

"I thought you — "

"You thought wrong."

"I've been waiting for you. At the boat. Every night, I watch you leave the restaurant and walk home. Every night I wish you'd come to me."

"You disgust me."

"Stop it. I know that's not true." Jimmy's shoulders began heaving. The sound of the rain became thunderous and sheets and blocks of it seemed to

dump right down around them. “God. God!” Jimmy cried out, his arms going up to the sky like some clown, like some revival preacher clown; the rain pouring against his face. A thunderclap hid the sound of his bleating. “If only you knew! If only you could grow up inside me! Knowing how I’ve been pushed and pulled, first my father forcing me into tennis and basketball and soccer since I was six years old, the camps I’ve gone to every summer, and these schools I go to, and what it all means when inside...inside Owen...you know something about yourself that’s like a doorway into a different world. Something that’s like...I don’t know...like a doorway out of this torture place and into this garden. When I was nine I had this garden that I helped create. It had vegetables and flowers in it, nothing pretty and nothing special, but it was mine. My dad dug it up in the middle of the night.

He dug it up and told me that no son of his was going to be a goddamn gardener. That’s what this feels like. Like someone is trying to dig up the garden I need to grow. And you know you need to go to that garden but every single human being from your mother to your father to your coaches to your teachers to your friends to even strangers — every single human being — wants you to keep away from the one garden where you know you can just help things grow and where you’ll feel calm for once in your life...where you will feel that what you have known inside your body, inside your heart, inside your

mind, is the way God and nature and whatever it is that moves things within any human being — meant for you to be.”

Owen nearly gasped when Jimmy had finished.

“Jim, Christ, I know,” Owen said, feeling as if he’d rehearsed the lines. He attempted a feeble smile. Part of him felt removed from within his body. He was watching himself — Owen — react, seem gentle, seem kind. “It’s just like that.” Then, he looked around at the tourists coming off the ferry, their black and clear and red and green umbrellas all blossoming above their heads, and there, beyond the Crab Shack were six of the island guys he’d grown up with; and when he looked through the thick rain, he saw other people he had known all his life.

“Look, we can’t do this here,” Owen said. “Get in the truck.”

10

Owen drove in silence through a rain-shattered world — and followed the slick black island roads until they were nearly to the Great Salt Pond.

Jimmy seemed content with the quiet of the drive. When Owen glanced over, he noticed that Jimmy pressed his forehead against the window beside him, reminding him somehow of a puppy. Finally, they came to the end of road-

break that looked out over the enormous pond. When he'd turned off the ignition, Owen reached over and took Jimmy's hand in his.

"I know. It's difficult," Jimmy said. "I'm not like this either. Not really. There are things I want out of life. Things that have nothing to do with this. But right now, Christ, right now, this is it."

"Other people can do this kind of thing, but I can't. It wouldn't be right."

"No, it wouldn't be. But we can go somewhere where it'll all be all right."

"Where?" Owen laughed. "Where would it be right? My god. Where?"

Jimmy recoiled as if he'd been slapped. "Out to sea. In the boat."

"For how long, Jimmy? How long before your dad cuts you off, or before we move on? How long before you need to go off to your Ivy League school and then marry and meanwhile, I live in some kind of shame on this island. I'm not like you. I'm not like the kind of men who do this with other men. I'm just...Just."

"Just?"

"Just not sure what I feel right now."

It was easy to lie once Owen knew what he would do with Jimmy. How he would destroy him. How it would go easy once everything was in place.

“Oh, baby,” Jimmy moaned, leaning over, into him, pressing his scalp against Owen’s neck. Owen felt wetness along his throat. “You don’t know how long I’ve hoped you’d say it.”

“We don’t need Jenna do we? Or girls like her,” Owen whispered.
“God, if I could, I’d kill her.”

“Who? Kill?”

“I didn’t mean that,” Owen said, and kissed him on the top of his head.

The rain beat down in great sheets around the truck, and the great clouds roiled, and Owen knew that he had him now.

He had Jimmy right where he wanted him.

Where Dagon wanted him.

Chapter Eight

Dagon

1

“Owen?” his mother asked, holding it in her hand. The statue. It had always seemed enormous to him, but in her hand, it was only a foot in length. The base was cracked, some of its teeth had fallen out, and all it was, after all, in her hand, was something that someone had carved and had left behind.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Where you left it,” she said. She hefted it in her hand. “Where did it come from?”

“I...I found it.”

“You found it?”

“Yeah, I did. It’s mine.” He held his hand out.

“Did you buy it?”

“That’s none of your business,” he said. “That’s mine.”

“Why did you put it in the fish pond?”

“It’s an ornament. It looked nice there. Give it back.”

“It’s terrible looking. It’s eyes. The skin on it. Who- ever made that thing was sick. I think some kind of animal was used. It smells, too.”

“Mother.”

“Don’t mother me. You may be a young man, but you have a thing or two to learn. I know you, Owen. I know how you think. I saw you that morning.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw you. You cut your arm and let it bleed on this...this thing.”

“That’s crazy. Why would I do something crazy like that? Like — what — like cut myself? And what — did you say — bleed?”

“It’s some kind of awful thing, isn’t it? This thing. It’s some awful thing for you. The way your mind works.” She looked at the small statue in her hand, and then back at his face. She squinted as if trying to see him more clearly. “You’ve never been quite right. You know that, too. You know how

you're different from other boys, don't you? Yes, you're crafty and you look good in a suit and you can make your muscles talk for you. But I know you better than you know yourself, Owen Crites. I know how cold you are on the inside. I know how you believe different things." He felt her closing in on him as she moved toward him. "What exactly is this thing? Is this a toy? Is this something else? Is this something you talk to? Is this...is this...some kind of devil god? Do you worship graven images now?" She said it in a half-joking manner, and that was the worst of it. She wasn't taking Dagon seriously. He could feel it in her tone.

Owen felt as if his tongue had been cut out. He felt a heat rash along his neck. He looked from the statue to his mother and back again. Then, he grinned. "Don't be ridiculous. You have such a small mind. You're so quick to judge me when you yourself are the one with the cold heart. You set a trap for dad and now you punish him for that same trap. You can't even love your only child. And your imagination — your paranoid imagination — finding some carved art in a koi pond, something that you claim you watched me bleed over, did you ever for a moment think that perhaps I hated myself so much that I wanted to slit my wrists? But something made me stop. Something kept me from hurting myself. But it wasn't the thought of you, was it? It wasn't the love of my mother that saved me, was it? It was the thought that maybe one

day I'd have a moment just like this. A moment when dad is out of the house. A moment when you're at your worst. And then, do you know what I am going to do with you?"

"What are you talking about? Owen? Owen?"

"Give me that," he said, snatching it from her hand. "It's mine. Not yours."

She stood before him, trembling.

Owen cradled Dagon in his arms. He closed his eyes, and whispered a brief prayer.

When he opened them, he said, "Here is something I hope you think about until the moment you die. I am going to be your dutiful son as long as your years continue. But the moment that I get an inkling that you are old and feeble, I will come to your bedside one night, and I will press my hands over your nose and mouth until you smother to death. And in those last moments, you will look on me and know that everything you were ever afraid of was true."

His mother pressed her hands to her lips, but was unable to speak.

It was the power of Dagon, of course. It was there, in the room.

The god was there with him.

Dagon whispered within his blood, “You will die like the bitch that you are.”

Or had Owen himself said it aloud, in a whisper, to his mother?

2

This is how it will happen, the voice came to him. You will tell her things. You will tell him things. He harbors a madness. He is breakable. Then, she will kill him. You will save her. She will kill him and you will have her.

He slept that night with Dagon next to him in bed, and dreamed of the great realm beneath the sea, and he no longer felt his age, but felt as if he were again a child, and Jenna was with him, the Queen of the Deepest Fathom.

3

“Hello sweetie,” Mrs M said. She had just finished the Sunday crossword puzzle, and looked up from the paper. “You all ready for four more days of this...this tempest?” The kitchen was like a brilliant day compared to the murky rain outdoors.

Owen had come in through the back, his towel in his arms. “Up for a swim, Cathy?”

Mrs M shook her head. “Feeling a bit downtrodden from the rain. Ask Frank, he’d probably love a race with you.”

“Mr M’s around?”

“He’s enjoying the summer here after all.”

“That’s great. I would’ve thought with the rain...”

Mrs M didn’t seem to notice his comment. She crossed her legs, one over the other, and Owen thought for a moment that it was the most luxurious movement he had ever in his life seen. “You here for Jenna?”

“I doubt she wants to see me.”

“Owen,” Mrs. M said, setting the paper down on the kitchen table. She arched an eyebrow. “Something’s changed about you. What is it? Turn around.”

Dutifully, he turned about and then back to face her again.

“You’re different now. What’s that all about?” She said it with a sweet amazement. “Are you in love?”

“No,” he said, too quickly.

“Jenna’s in her room. She sleeps later and later. Go call her if you want. She should get up. It’s nearly ten. No one should sleep this late. Not at her age. Not in summer.” Then, Mrs M leaned forward, her breasts dropping slightly out of her robe. “Between you, me, and the wall, Owen, I think she’s

really depressed over something. But I'm the last person she'll confide in. I imagine it's about a boy," she whispered. "That McTeague character."

Then, she said, lightly, "I always thought there was something not right about him."

4

"Oh. It's you," Jenna said. She was sitting up in her bed, the covers around her white cotton nightgown.

"Hi," he said from the doorway. The room smelled of sandalwood and vanilla.

"It's the rain. It does this to me," she said, wiping her hair back from her face. "I hate storms." She added, idly, almost as if he wasn't listening, "It's like my summer got stolen."

He remembered the love that he had nearly forgotten. He remembered why he loved Jenna so much. She was there for him, always. She had always been there for him.

"Okay if I come in? You know, like I used to?"

"Sure," she said, drawing her knees up. Then, "What is it between you two?"

He went into the bedroom, and sat down on the chair near her desk.

“Who two?”

“Don’t be coy,” she said unpleasantly. “Jimmy. Is it just sex?”

“Oh. That.”

“Yes. That.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I think you do.”

“No, I really don’t.” And then, something within him opened up. It was like feeling a heat — a fire — in his chest, near his heart. It was Dagon.

Dagon would inspire him. He felt that strength, suddenly, just when he thought he would falter. Without even trying, tears poured from his eyes.

“Owen? Owen?” she asked, but he was nearly blind from the tears. She lifted the blanket, and patted a space next to her. “Come here. What’s wrong? Owen?”

He bawled like a baby, and without knowing who — or what — had moved him, he found himself in her bed, her arms around him.

“Aw, Owen, what’s wrong? What’s wrong my precious, precious, precious baby boy?” She held him close, and Dagon was there. He felt it. He was not alone.

Dagon was there.

The voice that came from his throat didn't feel like his. It was some small boy's. Some crybaby who shivered and spilled emotion across the girl he loved.

“He...I didn't...I didn't want...I can't talk about...I didn't...he just kept...he just kept...he kept...he...I tried to...fight...fight...fight...push...hit...but...he just kept... he just kept...he just kept.”

“Oh my god,” Jenna said, her voice chilled and haunted. “No. He didn't. No. Did he? Owen? Did he rape you? Did he?”

“He just kept...oh god, Jenna, I can't face this...I wanted to...I wanted to...I wanted to...kill...myself...I wanted to...”

And so it began, and she said all the things that she was meant to say; and Owen told less than he needed to tell, because she made the connections herself, and he sat with her for hours in her arms, and then, they made love.

5

He went to the boat that night.

It was over now. It was all over. Dagon was still within him, and he had won.

He wanted to take it to Jimmy. He wanted Jimmy to suffer from it. If he could, he would've videotaped the afternoon, he would've tape-recorded Jenna's voice saying over and over again that she loved him, that it was all her fault, that Jimmy should never have come to the island, that he was bad, he was evil, and they should call the police, they should do something. She even told him that if that bastard ever set foot on her property again, she would take that gun and shoot him right between the eyes.

The storm continued to rage, but in muted anger, across the gray mood of sky. The Sound and the distant islands that could be seen were like watercolor images, fuzzy and melting in the rain. Owen wore a bright yellow raincoat that belonged to his father. He was a fire in the darkness.

"Mooncalf, you look like a fisherman," Jimmy said. He wore cut-off jeans and a striped rugby shirt that was already soaked through, and his hair was like seaweed, hanging in his eyes. In his hand, a green bottle of beer. "Like, you know, a real New England Clam Chowder Fisherman!" He had to shout over a roll of thunder and a crack in the sky; then the world lit up for a moment; it returned to gray.

Owen laughed, shaking his head. "You're drunk, boy."

"Want a beer?" Jimmy asked.

"Sure," Owen said. "How many you drink already?"

“Four. Maybe five. Who’s counting?”

“Let’s get out of the rain!”

“I like the jetty,” Jimmy said, tossing him a small bottle and then leaping to the dock. He grabbed Owen’s free hand. “No one’s looking. We can hold hands, all right?”

“I don’t know.” Owen tugged away. He twisted the top off the Rolling Rock bottle, and took a swig. “God, I’m sick of rain!”

“Me, too!” Jimmy tried to kiss him, but Owen stepped back to avoid it.

The rain lightened slightly; it was a warm rain; it washed across their bodies. “She’s sort of expecting us,” Owen said.

“Who?”

“Jenna.”

“Jenna?” Jimmy laughed, and then looked sidelong up the hill to the Montgomery place. “What for? I thought it was you and me tonight.”

“She’s...she’s pissed. I guess that’s what it is,” Owen shrugged. “She’s pissed and she wants us to talk to her. I told her.”

“You...you told her?”

“After yesterday, in the truck, Christ, Jimmy, I can’t not tell her. I’ve known her all my life. She’s one of my closest friends. I told her about us.

About how we're going to go away together. How you love me now. How everything's all right."

"You...you..." he stammered. The bottle in his hand dropped to the rocky ledge, shattering. "You told her."

It was coming out now. The madness that they all had within them. Owen wanted to smile, but knew that if he did, he would give himself away.

6

The rain thinned. Minutes had passed while Jimmy had taken in what had just been said. Owen could practically see the thoughts in the eyebrows as they squiggled around, flashing anger and confusion, and the way he chewed his lip, and his eyes wouldn't stop blinking. Owen reached over and touched his scalp. "Sometimes I think I see a halo around your head. I do. I think you're some kind of angel," Owen said, and then scruffed his hair.

"You fucking told her?" Jimmy growled. "You goddamn fucking son of a bitch told her what we'd been...what we'd..."

"Do you think she didn't see?" Owen set his bottle down on the jetty, and put his hands on Jimmy's shoulders, pulling him into him. "Do you think she's stupid? We're her friends, for Christ sakes. She can see. She told me she watched us that first night. She saw us. There was enough light to see our

shadows, puppy. She told me it upset her, but she understood. She wasn't sure if it wasn't just one of those drunk boy things...or something else. I told her it was." Then, he added hesitantly, "Something else."

"You fucking goddamn son of a bitch gardener's son living in your goddamn peasant fucking world you don't even know what you've done!" Jimmy shouted. His face had contorted until it was more mask than face, a mask of pain and fury. It was no longer human. "You fucking think that," spit flew from his mouth, "that...that...you, you, with nothing to lose can just throw what we have in front of her, in front of — you know what you're playing with? You're playing with things you can't even understand!" Jimmy began stomping around in a circle, alternating his shouts with lion roars.

When he finally quieted, Owen said, "What happened to yesterday? You looking up at God and telling me how this all felt, how you felt on the inside. How you felt you needed to let this out? What happened to that?" He kept his voice low.

Jimmy's eyes lit up. "Don't you, you son of a bitch, use my words against me! I wasn't born to lose everything because I'm sleeping with some island townie pervert, I wasn't born to have this get out, to have this ruin everything I've ever built."

“Listen to yourself. It’s practically a whole new century. You talk like it’s 1950. You won’t lose everything just because — ”

“You think so? You little bitch, you think I won’t lose everything? You don’t even understand what is going on here do you? You think it’s about me wanting you. The stakes are higher! I’ll tell you something, boy, I want you, but I don’t want you. You don’t even understand why I have to be with Jenna, do you? Do you?”

Owen turned and began walking toward the strip of beach. “I don’t want to hear.”

“Well, you need to. Maybe living in some little caretaker’s house gives you no perspective on this, but Jenna Montgomery means I will not be some poor shit like you.”

Owen glanced back. “You’re rich.”

“Ha!” Jimmy cried. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“You’re an heir to some fortune. Some sports store chain.”

Jimmy shook his head. “It’s not like it looks. My father has these stores. That’s all he has. But the business is changing. It’s changing, and he’s had some setbacks. He isn’t a good businessman, Mooncalf. Never has been. All this stuff, this boat, the houses, all of it, will be gone in a few years. It’s coming.

He's going to be in jail someday, my father, and the IRS is going to eat him alive. And I do not intend to live like that. I do not intend..."

"Jesus," Owen gasped, and then began laughing. "Jesus. You're just a golddigger. You're just after her money. Jesus!"

Owen dropped to his knees on the wet sand.

"What's wrong with you?" Jimmy snarled, coming over to him. "You feeling bad now?"

"I thought you loved me," Owen said.

Jimmy's voice had grown cold. "It's not about whether I love you or not. It's not about that. But you've ruined even that now."

He grabbed Owen under his armpits, lifting him up to a standing position. "You've destroyed something for me, Mooncalf. You really have."

Then, he looked up the hill to the house. The lights were on along the pool, and the upstairs light — Jenna's bedroom — was dim.

"I need to set this right," he said.

"No, don't, Jimmy, it's —"

"I need to," Jimmy said. "I'll tell her that it was weakness. I'll tell her I love her. I love her more than anything on the face of the earth. I'll tell her that I couldn't help myself with you, but that it was nothing. That you were nothing." He nearly laughed, but it had a cry within it. "You're just a little

manipulative piece of trash. She'll understand. She's not like you. She'll understand."

Then, he took off in the rain, bounding up the wooden steps that crept like a vine along the side of the hill, and Owen began following, but slowly.

He heard the shots ring out before he had reached the top step. Five distinct shots, and soon dogs down in town were howling, and lights came up along the waterfront.

7

The house was dark and silent when Owen went in through the glass doors by the pool. He walked past the shimmering water, flicking up the lights as he went. Entering the kitchen, he saw Mrs. M, lying in a pool of blood, and then Owen found himself moving more swiftly, his heart pounding —

— she resembled nothing of the mermaid she had once been; death had robbed her beauty; blood took away the magic of her form; her eyes were open, and fish-like —

Dagon, what is this? This isn't what was promised. This isn't what I prayed for

—

— And he ran up the stairs to Jenna’s room, and found *him* standing there, the Colt in his hand —

On the bed, Jenna, bleeding, an enormous hole in her neck. Her hands moved as if she were trying to reach up to her neck to stop the blood, but could not.

She opened her mouth to cry out, but all that came was a rasping sound, and while blood pulsed from her throat. He felt himself burning as he watched the last light flicker in her beautiful eyes.

Then, her eyes closed.

8

“Mooncalf, what did I do?” Jimmy said, his skin red, his eyes narrow slits, his shirt torn and bloody. Tears and sweat shone like diamonds on his skin. “What did I do? I...I came up...I wanted to talk...and she...she had this...” He held the pistol up. “She...she threatened me...and then her mother came up...I had grabbed it from her...I was going to leave...but they said things...her mother, too...they said ...things about me...and her father...about something...some lie...something you told her...something...”

“All of them?” Owen asked. “You killed. All of them.”

Jimmy shrugged. “I guess so. It’s kind of a blur. Funny thing is,” he giggled in a way that seemed uncharacteristic, “it didn’t really feel like me at all. It felt like something else. Like I got taken over. Maybe if she hadn’t pointed this gun. Maybe if I hadn’t been drinking. I don’t know. It happened fast. I was about to leave, but her mother saw me with the gun. She saw me and she was saying these things. And then I just wanted to shut her up and this thing was inside me. This feeling. Like something wanted me to point the gun at her mother. Just to scare her. And then: kabang.”

“Jimmy?”

“And then her father starts shouting upstairs, and I feel this...this wild thing inside me,” Jimmy said, and now the giggling was becoming annoying and seemed to increase between words. “And I just go running back up the stairs and down the hall and there’s her dad, and I think of my dad, and I think of all the things I’m never going to have, and suddenly the gun is going off, and then Jenna’s screaming and she’s picking up the phone in her room because I hear that beep beep noise and I have to stop her, I have to tell her not to call, that there’ll be a way to work this all out. And then, I feel it in me again. I’m moving faster than I’m supposed to — the rest of the world is moving slow — and I’m in her room and she has a look on her face like she doesn’t understand

how I got there so quickly and I'm feeling this — power or something — and then I press the gun against her throat to shut her up.”

Then, he calmed slightly. He pointed the gun directly at Owen. “It’s something you said to her. Isn’t it? It’s because you told her. But you said something terrible, didn’t you?”

“Jimmy,” Owen said. “Now, I know you’re upset. I know this is difficult right now. But I want you to breathe. Take a few deep breaths. Come on. Just breathe. The secret is in breathing.”

Jimmy looked at him curiously for a moment, blinking. Then he opened his mouth and let the air in.

Then, out.

Then, in. Slowly, carefully.

Then, warmth returned to Jimmy McTeague’s eyes and he said:

“Owen, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I should never have come this summer.”

Epilogue

Belief

1

I can look at this past summer now and see that it was all Dagon. Dagon was there, I had brought Dagon into our world, and Dagon had gotten loose. There is no madness except the madness of the gods. There is no purity except the purity of love.

Here is where he took me — down to the sailboat — and out to sea.

2

We sailed around Outerbridge, its cliffs and caves, around the Montgomery palazzo, shining green and white with the flashing of the

lighthouse nearby, north and then east, beyond the Great Salt Pond, out into the diamond night where sea and sky met, and the storm howled around us, and Jimmy, gun to my head, calling me Mooncalf over and over again, forced me to whisper an incantation to Dagon of the purity and madness of human love.

Mooncalf, he said. Mooncalf.

THE END

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Afterword: The Writing of *Purity*

All right, this will sound nuts, because *Purity* is so short, but it took me a year to write this little story. A year? Well, in reality, it took me a few years of mulling over an incident that happened in the news.

Basically, there was this love triangle. A guy cheated on his girlfriend with another girl. His girlfriend found out and then schemed with the guy to kill the girl with whom he'd transgressed their relationship. I believe in news reports, the word "purity" had been used, and it got me thinking about what purity was, what it meant to people in love, what you might do if you wanted someone or something so badly.

I wasn't sure how I'd ever write this story, so I put it aside in that part of my brain that seems to store this stuff. I labeled it – for my braincave – “Purity,” and went on to write some other stories.

Then, one day, I was thinking about my college days, and how guys I knew were as impressed with a girl's wealth – in terms of potential dating – as anyone assumes a gold-digger would be. I found it fairly despicable, but as I've grown older, I've found a lot of human ugliness begins with the want of money and the fear of not having enough. I'll state this frankly: when I grew up, unbeknownst to me, I was being groomed to want a lot of money. By who or what? Culture? Suburban dreams? School that encouraged alums to become wealthy? I don't know. But I found myself in college, noticing how much money people had, and how other men and women I knew in college were impressed and over-awed by wealth. And I guess I was guilty of this as well. Now, I think money is fine and good. But I do think when people focus on it to the exclusion of health and happiness, it's the wrong road. Mainly because I

also believe, in my screwed-up way, that the more you want something, the less likely it is that you'll ever get it.

Then, I began to think of *Purity* as a poor boy who wanted his dreams to come true. Where did he get these dreams? He's poor, after all. TV? Probably not. All right, another episode from college: when I was about 19 or 20, I went with some friends to Martha's Vineyard one summer, where one friend's family had their home. It was a blast, but all I saw on that island was money. Wealth. People who did the things in life – whether from inheriting or hard labor – got to the top, and had boats and summer homes and all those things that seemed to me to be signs of outward success. I wondered what it took to have those things. I wondered what it felt like to know you were in the world of the haves, and to not really worry about the have-not issues. Of course, I was just barely an adult when I was thinking those things, and I've learned since that what appears to be wealth often is not, and what appears to be happiness, often is anything but.

And I thought a lot about the twin pulls for many people in life: between love and money. How often do we have to choose? How much is enough? How

does one love without a dime? How does one love with a dime in one's pocket?

Crazy little musings on my part, I guess.

So, I began to recall, from my braincave, that story of the love triangle and murder. That was a crazy nasty murder that supposedly involved love, but obviously was as much about control and human darkness. And somehow, I imagined Owen, from *Purity*, standing on a little island of summer people, looking every day at the Big House, with the rich little girl who was, to him, everything that world had to offer beyond the clams and the sea and the boats and the chores.

And then I imagined an interloper, a confused, seemingly-wealthy intruder to this island paradise, to the world that Owen controlled in his own maniacal and often-imaginary way.

This short novel was born. Because I'm such a big fan of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, I felt that the fish-god Dagon should come along, that the sense of a god would focus Owen's inner thoughts and begin his secret adventures as a guy who was willing to do anything to achieve his ends. I began writing in early 1999, and kept coming back to this story, and then editing it

down to its most essential parts, which, in my opinion, have to do with Owen and his consciousness. The first edition of the hardcover came out in the late spring of 2000, and now this .pdf format of the book, for you, in Decemeber 2000.

I hope you've enjoyed *Purity*. Drop me a line, if you'd like:

dclegg@douglaslegg.com

Or drop by my website for a visit and sign in at the guest book or leave a message on the message board:

www.douglaslegg.com

Douglas Clegg, December 2000.

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS FILE OF
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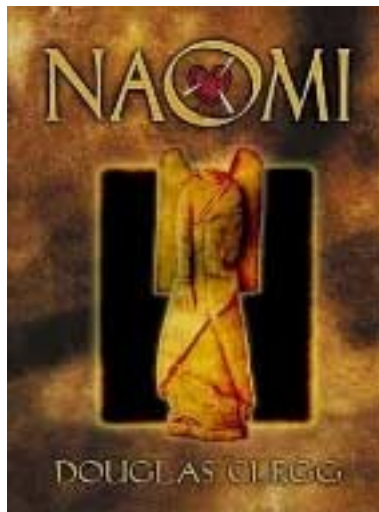
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- Read it – of course!

EXCERPT FROM NAOMI

What follows are brief excerpts from my novel *Naomi* (which will be out in hardcover in January 2001, and in paperback in late April 2001. All author royalties from the first paperback edition of Naomi will go to the National Down Syndrome Society – www.ndss.com . Please encourage your favorite booksellers to stock a lot of this book.)

Here is the cover to the limited edition hardcover, available at

www.subterraneanpress.com :



NAOMI

BY DOUGLAS CLEGG

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Chapter One: The City

1

Destiny lurks, but when the time is ripe, it devours.

New York City, this year, right now, the world seems new as a century dawns, as winter surrounds the fingers of brick and marble.

Don't imagine for a moment the silver towers of Manhattan, shining in December with sweat and frost. Forget the postcard images in your mind of the city. The looming skyscrapers. The brown and gray apartment buildings obscuring any trace of morning sunlight. Lose your memory of the small grocery mart with its rows of oranges and apples and cheap flowers. The great

clock over the Persian rug shop. The trattoria with ragged awning flapping, traces of soap on its windows. The smell of the street, of the stone, of the people, of the dogs, of the entity that can only be known as city, a thing both dead and alive at the same time.

Imagine instead a vast cavern of overgrown brownstone and gleaming pumice, frozen in spray up to the sky. Imagine the anthill and its inhabitants. Imagine anything but the buildings along 8th Avenue, the yellow taxicabs, the young man in sweatpants and hooded jacket jogging, the gray-suited bald man with glasses, shivering, a steaming Starbucks coffee cup in hand; the handsome and the ugly; the elfin woman still drunk from the previous night, blown by an icy gust as she walks her Boston terrier on a short leash; the masks and the faces they reveal; the two shiny men with gym bags; the piles of trashbags; piles of kids as they wander with their Walkmans and cel phones; the overcoats fluttering; the hat pulled down over ears. Through it all, the serpent turns.

And it lurks.

And it will devour.

The message steams in the crisp cold air, the breaths of fog that pour like smoke from the mouths of people wandering the chilly city streets. It's written in smoke from the exhaust of buses. The billboards, the walls, the wide

boulevards, the narrow alleys, the scaffolding along 14th Street, all of it is a warning to the one boy who understands the omen.

The citadel of stone could stand for a hundred more years, and still none will escape destiny as it waits, hungry.

Only you know it, because you are part of the Below. You are close to the pulse of how this island kingdom runs. You are one of the few who can journey from the Below to the Above and back. With only the fear to keep you going.

And you know that today, the serpent is loose.

Your destiny is tied up with the serpent, only you don't know why or how. You know, because it has been foretold. You know because destiny is a wicked thing.

But it is an ordinary winter's day. They call the city New York. They live within the belief that all is well for now.

Somewhere across this island, there are construction workers' jackhammers making the earth's crust tremble. Somewhere, between the Above and the Below, what should've stayed chained has been set free. They all dig down deep but never find the true Below, they never know all the wormholes that the serpent has, but you know. You and the others like you. You know the passages of the serpent. You always have understood the serpent

and the darkness. You know that no matter how it looks in the Above, what has been loosed cannot be put back.

But it's business as usual here, in the Above. Up where the sun burns and the city steams even in its frozen glory. Christmas is coming. The lights are up and dazzling, even early in the day. Shop windows are heavy with ornament and display. The snow from the week before has all but melted in the city. The trash bags roll and shift with wind, and rats scurry along the side streets as the Village bleeds into Chelsea into the Meat-Packing District with its bones and the smell of the dead.

And she is there.

The woman who seems so familiar, perhaps because she resembles all the other women on the street, but she is their essence. She is determined. She is in focus and still a blur of movement. She is unstoppable in some way.

You watch her walk – no, you watch her *stride* towards her goal.

In her stride, her destiny.

She is the kind of woman that once seen, will never be forgotten. Not because of some ideal of beauty, but because of her very nature. She is the unmade bed. She is the lost unknown,. She is the woman of whom other people speak but no one invites. She is unfathomable mystery. She is purity-in-chaos. Something makes you watch her. Something within you longs to

follow her on her journey. Her eyes are brutally kind. Her face is pale without being sunless, a redness around her eyes and nose, a vulnerability.

She has the look of having been in the storm, droplets glistening on her skin, crystal snowflakes melting.

You read her thoughts in her hands as she gracelessly reaches in her coat for keys or some Kleenex or a good luck charm or a memento from the past.

You see the child-like way she smiles at nothing, perhaps at the very air itself, perhaps at the folly of life.

She reminds you of the woman you'd want to meet someday; but she has darkness within her.

She has spent her life searching for the serpent. Now, it will find her.

She is dangerous.

2

"Destiny lurks, it does, I tell you when your time's ripe, it devours, it surely does, it's a devourer, it opens its jaws and unlocks just to get you." That's what the teenaged boy on the corner of 14th Street and 8th said to the woman who had passed up his offer to allow her to give him change.

He shook the can that had once held Del Monte pineapple slices and now clanged with a few quarters and several pennies, and perhaps later on would carry water or soup if he could get some.

His stink was strong, a gust of foulness from the pit of some unwashed arm. His name was long forgotten, but those who called him friend also called him Romeo, for no other reason than the fact that he roamed.

"Listen, you give me change, lady, and I give you salvation. Nice bargain you was to ask me," he said, his voice like the squeal of brakes over shattering glass bottles.

He was too old to be young and too young to be old, and his red baseball cap had seen better gutters. He was probably no more than a teenager, but he still seemed ancient. His hair was yellow-brown straw beneath the cap. His eyes were dull and milky as if he suffered from some ailment a woman like this would never want to know about. His grin was infectious in all the unfortunate ways. "All right, lady, destiny lurks but it can devour any second, and just the price of a cup of coffee'll get you some relief. It's a -- whoa -- a huge mother of a snake -- and it gets out and it bites you where the sun don't shine. I said it's got a sting and a bite and then it just chows down like you don't even matter and I seen it. I know what it can do."

He knew his words didn't sound as clear as he thought them in his head, but he said them anyway. Language was different in the Below. Words were used sparingly, there. Words could not be wasted in darkness. (Scabber had told him once about speaking, and how words were like magic. "Magic don't get spent free," she had told him. "Gotta price. Like every damn thing. A big price. A great price.")

The woman with destiny glanced at him once. He was sure that she looked right through him before moving on.

She walked awkwardly towards the subway entrance, with her tan coat, her faded jeans, the way her hair wasn't quite combed, nor was it quite blond.

And something about the way she glanced back at him let him know that she was not one of the Above People even if she hadn't given him a quarter or the time of day.

She's one of us.

She had the darkness in her already. He could tell. Had she somehow escaped the Below of life and lived in the Above for so many years that she had forgotten the darkness? But the scent of it was still on her. She was meant for shadows.

The street, so alive with suits and skirts and rags and vendors and loafers, washed her image away like a sudden downpour.

Hunger wrestled with his fears. He kept shaking his cup and hoping that he'd get enough change to take care of his great burden. He didn't like the thought of the serpent or of the lady who wanted to find it, but there was no coming between what was and what was meant to be.

Chapter Two: The Woman in the Subway

1

Don't think, just do.

The words were like mosquitoes humming around the woman who stepped down into the urban underworld known as the subway. Within her mind, the world itself was a mass of mosquitoes all swirling in patterns around her. The past and present blurred into a mess in her brain, and her head ached with all of the images from childhood and from what she'd been hiding and what she'd been revealing – it was a storm within her flesh that had no calm center.

Just do, she thought, wiping at her nose with a Kleenex.

Quit thinking so much. Thinking too much about it is what screws everything up.

A cold, left over from Thanksgiving, lingered in her sinuses.

She fumbled with the nasal spray bottle to get one last clear breath . She laughed at herself, wondering why she was so worried about her stupid cold, why she even cared anymore. Inhaling, she smelled the dust and piss of the subway and street. Then her head began pounding again. She'd had a Sudafed with a glass of wine at six a.m., hoping it would allow her to fall asleep. Instead, it just seemed to make the pain more intense.

She wanted to get the feeling out of her system. It manifested itself in a throbbing at the edges of her scalp and a constant hammering behind her eyes. Her head pounded with a thousand words left unsaid, conversations she'd wanted to have, arguments she wished she'd been brave enough to incite. But none of it added up to much, and so little was clear she just wished all thinking would stop.

Don't think. Don't let the voices and the words and the darkness come through. You know what must be done. What you must do. You can't go back to what never was. You can't make something gentle from a tangle of barbed wire. You can clean up what has already happened. .

But one thought above all others pounded at her, the hammer of one thought, up and down, again and again, behind her eyes. One thought.

All she could think about as she went down the cold stone steps was that Alan would never have let her leave the apartment had he known that she intended to throw herself in front of the first train that came down the tunnel.

2

But he'd gone out for an hour, and she had her chance.

In under a minute she laughed, wept, and smiled. Then, she closed her eyes and tried to pray but there were no more prayers in her. She glanced up at the sky before it disappeared from view as she went down the stairway into the bowels of the city.

A last glimpse of sky. White with clouds. The bare trees of winter.

She tried to picture the winter sky as she walked through the passageway. The walls comforted her to some extent; this was a safe enclosure, an antidote to the open muddy fields and burnt ruins of her childhood. The city was a cold but welcome embrace, and she never felt it more strongly than down in the subway.

She knew what he would say.

The Alien. His name was Alan. She liked to think of him as *Alien* because then it was easier to not let him touch her anymore, to not let him get under her skin in any way.

But still, she knew what he would say if he'd been there to stop her.

"Naomi," he'd say, "it's the winter blues, that's all. Have you been off your prescriptions again? That's not good. That's not sticking with the program."

Sticking with the program.

Learning to cope.

Making do.

Recovering.

All of them, Alien buzz words. "When you have all your ducks in order, we can sit down and talk about the future," he'd say. Whenever he used this phrase, she wanted to get an Uzi and shoot all those ducks and watch the blood and feathers fly. Just in her mind. Just the imaginary ducks that the Alien talked about. She wanted to squeeze his voice out of her head. His voice, his metaphors, the sound of his footsteps.

She knew how he would suddenly be gentle with her. And how she would lash out at him. He would sit there and be gentle and even kind. Her thoughts would turn violent; his kindness would feel violent to her. Sometimes kindness was the worst sort of treatment.

She wanted to tell him she'd been seeing another doctor who suggested she'd been misdiagnosed. It was a lie, but she wanted to tell him that. She knew that the Alien would really find a way to twist that up so that she would begin to doubt her own sense of reality again. She didn't even blame him.

It was her. It was completely her. *"You need to pay for good medical care. These therapists you know," he'd say, his head shaking slowly, "bargain basement prices, and no real training..."*

But none of that mattered.

She had to smile as she bought a subway token -- a buck fifty. A subway ride was still a bargain, one of the last of real bargains. *A real bargain basement.* You could go anywhere on the subways in Manhattan for a buck fifty. That was New York all over. Anywhere that didn't matter, you could get there cheap. She could go the length of the island and never get back to the place where she'd been happiest.

A child stared up at her as she dropped the token in the turnstile.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a wan look as if he had no expectations. His mother, a cool drink of water -- that's what Jake would've said. *(Don't think of Jake. You can't undo all of it. He would know. He would find out. He would hate you.)*

The boy's mother was in a bad mood. Her eyes were fixed on the boy's hands, like a cat ready to pounce. "Where's your token?" the mother asked and the boy's mouth dropped, drool on the edge of his lips. "Where the hell is it?"

The child watched her even while his mother clutched his hands, demanding his token.

Two men, tall and stocky, hair on one like a rock star, non-existent on the other, businessmen in blue and gray uniforms, rushed past her. The earthquake rumbling of the approaching train grew louder. Catching a train was serious business. A crazy woman (she thought as she watched herself being watched) slowly walking to the platform was to be jostled and elbowed. A short redhead in a raincoat practically shoved her. Then the rain of people followed in her wake.

From all corners they shoved and slipped between one another, creating pockets of personal space. Black, white, a woman in furs, a teen in a leather jacket with purple hair, humanity as if one big ball of multicolored wax had melted together. They melted into one another as they rushed forward, grabbing their places along the platform.

To her, it was not a platform on the subway, but a precipice.

It was the Edge.

The Edge was everywhere.

The Edge was life, and she was always on the verge of discovering what lay beyond the Edge.

Her eyesight was all messed up; *tears? No, not tears.* Tension. The headaches. The memory that she could never dredge up, no matter how hard she tried. All she could call it was the blank spot of her life. The yowling in the darkness; the feeling of rocks; the sense of what was there with her, hiding with her, breathing...But her vision sucked -- she laughed thinking of it that way. The faces in the crowd, she remembered the poem, *the apparition of these faces in the crowd...*

We're all ghosts, already. We reach adulthood and we're already gone from the world that matters. We're just keeping things in order for the next crop of people. We go about our business. And why? We're ghosts. We repeat patterns without knowing that we have no effect. Our lives are determined before we're twenty After that, we just repeat. It's already the future. These people are already ghosts. I am a ghost.

The apparition of these faces in a crowd...

I am no one.

My time has come and gone.

I am ruined, she laughed to herself. It sounded so Victorian, so ancient, so melodramatic. *I am ruined. I will be no more.*

4

She stood there, her head throbbing.

Slowly, she walked to the edge of the platform, closing her eyes. Her steps seemed completely silent to her. Was she invisible? She could be. Maybe she had always been invisible. She barely noticed the murmurs as those she passed spoke about the lives they were leading, their victories that were really just defeats in disguise. Their eyes had not been opened.

Images bled in her mind:

Her mother, lying in the coffin; the things in the dark, moving like liquid; the Alien, his eyes flashing green, picking her up in the rain outside of Lincoln Center, his car so warm, his manner so smooth, her desperation so great; the blank spot, the blindness of moments in time, moments that were cut from her and had turned to yowling darkness; and Jake -- *just his face, sixteen years' old, sweat shining like smoldering ashes under his skin...Jake, if only Jake were here...If only I had the courage...*

Now, the other voice within her whispered. It was the voice of her highest self, she knew. The one who knew how to do things. The one who knew where she was going.

Now.

The sound of the train grew louder, and the tunnel wind swept her hair -
-

One foot ventured into the air beyond the platform. The rumbling was loud.

She could feel the train's heat in the wind that gusted through the tunnel.

She could do it. She knew she could. Another step forward. Then she'd fall.

The train would reach her before she landed on the tracks.

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