



faces of death

Victor Cerda, Jr.

Down in the Dirt
2004 chapbook
Scars Publications

The Eternal Lesson



Will wanted to stay, but knew he had to go. He led Gina through the hallway of their two-bedroom apartment, reached the door, turned around, and kissed the hand of Quentin, his newborn son, who was cradled in Gina's arm. Will reached for Gina's open hand, and she squeezed it gently.

"Please be careful baby, and good luck," she said, and she kissed his forehead.

"Don't worry, we'll be all right."

She smiled and said with a tear in her eye, "I love you."

He forced a smile and said, "Love you, too, baby."

Turning the doorknob to leave, Will heard a soft voice behind him say, "Bye, Daddy." It had been years since he'd heard that. He turned and saw his first-born son, T.J., standing next to Gina with his head rested against her hip. Was this forgiveness? If not, it was a start.

"Be good for your ma while I'm gone," Will said, rubbing the top of T.J.'s head.

"I will," T.J. answered and he ran back to the black and white TV, with a coat hanger as its antenna.

"I told you all he needed was time," Gina said as Will opened the door. Hoping she was right, he stepped into the hallway and down the twisted staircase.

What am I gonna do? he asked himself as he ventured down the broken sidewalk of his run-down neighborhood. He walked slowly, head hung, both hands in his pockets. He was off to a late start and concerned about money: for food, rent and living. The little money they did have, Gina spread out for as long as she could, but now it was gone.

“Yo, Willie!” shouted a sharp-dressed man running toward him. “Damn, baby, where da fuck you been?”

“What’s up?” Will replied. It had been a long time since he’d seen Darrell, and he wasn’t excited to see him.

Darrell embraced Will tightly, tapping his fists against his back. Will reluctantly returned the gesture.

“Ain’t seen ya ‘round lately,” Darrell said, stepping away from him. “What’s been up?”

“Tryin’ to make them ends. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Yeah, I heard you was lookin’ for a nine ta five. Given’ up hustlin’ and stealin’. Man, when I heard dat shit, I laughed my mutha fuckin’ ass off. I said ‘Will ain’t had no job his whole goddamn life, and he ain’t ‘bout ta start now. What da fuck he gonna do?’ Man, you don’t know nothin’ but hustlin’ and stealin’. Ya need ta stick wit what ya know. Ya need ta come back and work for me.”

“I can’t do that, D,” Will replied. Everyone called Darrell D. The last person to call him Darrell had ended up with a bullet in his brain.

“Tell ya what,” Darrell said, reaching into his leather coat pocket. It was mid-summer and too hot for a jacket, but he wore one every day. “First two are on me,” he said as he pulled out and displayed two vials of rock cocaine. Darrell was known as a shit-talker and a fast-talker. As a pimp, he sweet-talked his women, and, as a drug dealer, he smooth-talked his customers. He didn’t care if Will smoked or sold the coke. He knew that if Will took it, he’d be back for more and next time it would have a price tag.

“No, thanks,” Will said, stepping back with his arms in the air. Not long ago, he would have stolen for what was being offered to him, but he’d made a promise to himself and Gina, and he planned on keeping it.

“I ain’t sayin’ ya gotta smoke da shit, man. Ya need money, sell it. It’s a one-time offer, baby. Take it or leave it.”

“Yo, man, I got shit to do,” Will said, stepping back and dropping his arms to his sides. “I’ll check you later.”

Darrell shifted the vials from his left hand to his right and extended his right hand to Will, attempting to give them to him as they shook. “You take

care now," he said, tapping Will's knuckles.

Will let the vials fall to the sidewalk as he pulled his hand away. One of them shattered as it hit the cement. As he walked away, Darrell bent over and picked up the vial that didn't break.

"You ain't gonna find no fuckin' job, man!" Darrell shouted, and shoved the vial back into his pocket. "Ain't nobody gonna hire no dirty ass, ex-fuckin'-con for nothin' but cleanin' up shit."

Will continued to walk away, but Darrell shouted louder.

"Ya know, I can always put Gina's fine ass ta work. I bet she could make a nigga a hell of a lot a money. Why don't ya try dat shit? I heard she can suck da fuck out a dick."

Will spun around and charged Darrell. Darrell lifted up the back of his jacket and pulled out a gun he'd tucked against the small of his back. Before he could aim it, Will tackled him, and gun hit the cement and slid into the street.

"Git da fuck off me!" Darrell shouted. Will sat on his chest and kneed his arms. "I was just fuckin' wit ya, man, now get da fuck off!"

Will wrapped his hands around Darrell's neck and squeezed. "If you go near her, I'll rip your fuckin' head off. Got it?"

"I was just playin'," Darrell choked.

"I don't fuckin' play that shit," Will said, releasing his neck. As he got up, Darrell rolled toward the curb to retrieve the gun, but Will kicked him in the face.

"You're fuckin' dead!" Darrell shouted as he rolled around on the sidewalk, holding his nose with both hands.

"I'll just have to see to it that it ain't you who kills me," Will said, picking up the gun. He pointed it at Darrell's head and kicked him in the stomach. "But you ain't fuckin' worth it." He turned on the safety, hid the gun under the back of his shirt and continued down the street.

"Fuck you!" Darrell shouted. "I know where you fuckin' live! I fuckin' promise you I'll....fuck!" His voice was replaced with laughter.

Will turned around and saw two crack-heads stomping on Darrell, who flopped around like a fish out of water. While Darrell lay face-down on the ground, one crack-head took his jacket and shoes, then searched his pants pockets. The other brought over a brick from the alley and slammed it against Darrell's head.

Will felt neither sorrow nor pleasure from the murder of Darrell. It just was.

x x x

An hour into his journey for employment, Will found a “Help Wanted” sign in the window of a grocery store a few miles east of his neighborhood. He entered the store and headed for the nearest cashier, who was hard at work scanning groceries for a young couple. “Excuse me, who do I talk to about the job?”

Without looking up from her register, she pointed behind him and said, “Him.”

“The guy in the clown tie?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks,” he said and walked over to the short, balding man who was bagging a variety of canned soups for an elderly woman. “Excuse me. I’d like to apply for the job.”

“Sure, give me one second,” the man said, and he continued to bag a head of lettuce and a dozen apples. He placed the woman’s bag in her cart, turned to Will, and said, “Follow me,” then led Will down an aisle of baby food and diapers to the employee breakroom at the rear of the store. “Have a seat and I’ll be right back with an application.”

“Is it possible to have an oral interview?” Will asked.

“Applications are mandatory. Have a seat and I’ll be back.”

Will sat down at one of two banquet tables. A redheaded kid was seated at the other. The gun slid up Will’s back as he leaned forward. “So what job are we applyin’ for?” he asked the kid. He reached around and pushed down the gun.

“Bagger,” the kid answered without looking up from his application.

The store manager returned and handed Will an application. “Here you go. Bring it to me at the front of the store when you’re finished.”

The redheaded kid stood. “I’m finished.”

“Already?” the manager said, taking his application. “All right, follow me.”

Will felt like he was back in school. The teacher and smart kid had left him alone to fail the test. He stood and grabbed the pencil the redheaded kid had left behind. He returned to his seat, holding the gun against his back and thought, Oh well, here goes nothin’.

x x x

Heading for the exit at the front of the store, Will saw the redheaded kid

wearing a white apron and bagging groceries. Figures, Will thought, leaving the store. He twisted the application into a ball and threw it into a garbage can that was next to the door. Not far from the exit, he accidentally bumped into and knocked down a short, overweight woman. “My fault,” he said as he reached his hand down to help her up.

“No, no, don’t hurt me,” she cried, with a thick German accent. “I have nothing.”

Will paused for a moment, noticing she was wearing a diamond ring and pearl earrings. He reached down to grab her purse, which she was gripping tightly with both arms.

“Hey you!” the store manager shouted from the doorway of the store. “Get away from her!” He ran toward Will and the woman.

“Shit!” Will shouted, and he ran around the corner of the store. When he crossed the street, he slowed down and began to walk. He came upon a gas station, about a mile east of the grocery store. He went inside and patiently waited behind a small boy who was buying candy and chips. “You got any job openings?” Will asked the plain-looking female cashier as the boy ran around him.

“Not right now,” she answered, chewing gum.

“You mind if I pump gas for tips?”

“You can’t do that. We have a no loitering policy here.”

x x x

As Will stepped off the curb and into the street, with his head hung low, he heard Gina’s voice repeat over and over in his head, “I love you.” When he reached the center of the street, a loud screech hissed out to his left and he was pushed to his knees. He leapt up as quickly as he went down and saw his assailant was inside a black BMW.

The man inside the car leaned on his horn and shouted out the window, “What are you, crazy? Watch where the hell you’re going!”

Surprised he wasn’t hurt, Will stumbled toward the sidewalk. As soon as he was out of the BMW’s way, it sped off down the street.

x x x

The man inside the car bent over and retrieved his cell phone from beneath his seat. A soft voice on the line shouted, “Joseph? What’s going on?”

Is everything OK? Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"What happened?"

"Some idiot thought he had a bumper on his ass and walked in front of my car without looking."

"You didn't hit him, did you?"

"No," he laughed. "He got away."

"Joseph!" the woman said as if she were scolding a child.

"I'm kidding. So why did you page me?"

"Why do you think? Ted just left for Florida and the girls don't get dropped off 'til seven. Got time?"

"I can make time," Joe said, and he looked at his watch. "See you in ten minutes."

"I'll be waiting."

Joe hung up and dialed another number.

"Hello, Thomas residence," a young voice answered after two rings.

"Hi, princess. How is your day?"

"Fine."

"That's good. Can I talk to Mommy?"

"Yep," she answered. "Mommy, Daddy on the phone!"

"Hi, honey. I was just thinking about you," Joe's wife said.

"Yeah? What were you thinking?"

"I need you to stop at the store on your way home."

Figures, he thought. "Speaking of on the way home," he said. "I'm going to be late."

"Ah, Joe," she said. "I made your favorite."

"So we'll have a late dinner. I'm sorry, honey, but I have to get this couple's signature before they change their minds, or find a different house. You know how it is. It shouldn't take too long. They've already looked at it about three times. I have a feeling that this is it. Now, what am I picking up?"

"Brenda needs typing paper for her history report, and we need more candles for tomorrow."

"Didn't we save the ones from Tina's birthday?"

"Yes, and if you were turning five, we'd have enough."

"Ha-ha," Joe said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, we're running out of milk."

"All right, my love. Be home as soon as I can."

x x x

Will wiped the gravel away from his worn jeans and continued down the street. Ain't nobody gonna hire me, he thought. But I gotta do somethin'. He shook his head to clear it, took in a long breath of air, and released an extended sigh. All of the houses on both sides of him were cleanly painted and surrounded with picket fences. Damn, he thought. How long I been walkin'?

He felt uneasy and out of place, like a lost child in a department store. He had heard of this place, "rich bitch island." Although it wasn't an actual island, the one hundred residents could only be reached by one road.

He heard a car approaching. He wasn't about to find out if someone saw him and called the police, so he took off running down the street. He turned down an alley and ran three blocks at top speed. In the middle of the fourth block, he gasped for air and leaned against a garage. As he slid down, the gun fell next to him.

He heard a door slam across the alley, forcing him to shove the gun under his shirt and slide around the corner. He peeked around and saw a middle-aged woman strapping a newborn into a car seat. After she drove past him in a silver Volvo wagon, he inspected the house she'd left and noticed an open window. Seeing no movement in any direction, he put the gun against the small of his back and ran to the open window. He pushed it higher, climbed up, and fell into the house.

He rose from the kitchen floor and stood still. He walked slowly out of the kitchen and into an open hallway. There was a dining area to his left, the front door to his right, and a staircase directly in front of him. He went past the front door and found a large room full of electronic equipment including a computer, a large-screen television, a VCR, a DVD player, and a stereo. "Damn," he said softly, wishing he had a vehicle. He had robbed many houses in his day.

"Cash and jewels will have to do," he said as he ran up the stairs. To his left were a bathroom and a child's room, to his right, a teenager's room and two closed doors. He opened the first closed door slowly and found a baby's room. "Gettin' warmer," he said, and he headed for the last door at the end of the hallway.

He opened that door. "Jackpot," he said. He felt like a child searching for eggs at an Easter hunt. He pulled clothes out of the dressers, shook them, and tossed them aside. He pulled pairs of women's shoes off the closet shelf. He pushed aside a row of hanging dresses and found a safe on the floor. He

tried to pick it up, but it was much too heavy. “Fuck!” He turned around, shoved the mattress off the bed, and ran out of the room and down the stairs.

On the second-last stair, he heard voices outside the front door. He saw the doorknob turn, leapt around the corner, and crouched, hiding behind the staircase.

Two young girls entered and ran up the stairs behind him, the eldest singing, “I hate you, you hate me. I chased Barney up a tree--”

“Mommy!” the smaller girl pleaded. “Tell her stop it.”

“Brenda,” a middle-aged woman said as she passed by Will, with a baby cradled in her arms. “Stop teasing your sister.”

“Yes, Mom. And you stay out of my room.”

Will pulled out his gun, raised it with both hands, and pointed it at the woman as she walked away from him.

“Mommy, Brenda pushed me!” the smaller girl shouted from the second level.

“If you two don’t stop it,” the woman said as she turned around. “Oh my God,” she gasped. “Please don’t kill me. Take anything you want.” She fell to her knees. “Please, I beg you.”

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, lowering the gun. He heard footsteps coming down the stairs from behind him, then stepped toward the front door.

“Who’s that, Mommy?” the small girl asked as Will opened the door.

“Go back upstairs, baby,” the woman answered.

Will stepped outside, slammed the door behind him, and ran.

x x x

“You think she knows?” the full-figured woman asked as Joe licked her nipple.

“Knows what?” he asked, between licks.

“About us.”

“No way. She trusts me. Besides, she thinks I’m working right now.”

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Trust her.”

“Crystal?” he laughed, looking up at the woman. “She doesn’t like sex enough to cheat on me. So, yeah, I trust her.”

“You don’t have to like sex to cheat.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, and he looked up from kissing her

breasts.

“I’m just saying not everyone cheats for sex.”

“Well, tonight it’s about sex,” he laughed, and he flipped the woman onto her stomach and entered her from behind, something he couldn’t do with his wife, because it made her feel like a dog.

x x x

Will collapsed between two rows of tall bushes that bordered a vacant bank. Exhausted and out of breath, he lay on his back and placed the gun on the soil next to him. He placed his hands over his beating heart and tried to calm down. He crawled to a small opening between two bushes. After a car passed, he saw a convenience store across the street. “Please be alone,” he said, watching a blond, teenage boy he saw through the window.

x x x

Driving home, Joe rehearsed his excuse. “I sold the house and they insisted on signing right away. And you know me, I had the contracts with me, so it took a little longer than I expected.” He picked up his cell phone and dialed.

“Hello,” a nervous voice answered after two rings.

“Hi, honey. What’s wrong?”

“Where in the hell have you been? I’ve been paging you for the past half hour!”

Joe never had heard his wife use the word “hell” before. “I’m sorry. I left my pager in--”

“I think we’ve been robbed.”

“What do you mean, ‘you think’?”

“When we came home from picking up Brenda, there was a man with a gun in the house.”

“What? He didn’t touch you, did he?”

“He didn’t do anything. When he saw me, he ran out the front door.”

“Thank God. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, just a little shaken up.”

“Hang on. I’ll be home in about five minutes.”

“Did you stop at the store?”

“No, I’ll go later.”

“Brenda has to finish her report tonight, and she needs paper. The world doesn’t stop just because someone messed up our room.”

“Messed up our room?”

“Yeah, there are clothes all over the place, but it doesn’t look like he took anything.”

“What about the safe?”

“The police said he tried to move it, but nothing’s missing.”

“The police? Are they there now?”

“Yeah, when you didn’t call back, I had to call somebody. They said they shouldn’t be here much longer.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come right home?”

“I’m sure. Everything’s fine now. I just have some cleaning up to do.”

“Well, this settles it. Tomorrow we’re getting an alarm.”

“Joe, let’s not overdo it.”

“Overdo it! I’m not gonna let someone waltz into our home whenever they feel like it and wave a damn gun around at my family!”

“Joseph! Calm yourself. We’ll talk about this later.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I just can’t allow that. When I’m not home, I want you to feel safe.”

“I do and we are. Believe me, he looked more scared than I was. I really do doubt he’ll be back.”

“Well, I can’t take that chance.”

“Are you on your way to the store?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t forget: milk, paper and candles.”

“Got it. I’ll be home as soon as I can,” he said, and he hung up. “Damn it!” he shouted, slamming his fists against the steering wheel. “I moved to the valley to get away from this shit!”

x x x

Will watched the store and the sunset for about twenty minutes. All he saw was two passing cars and a couple walking their dog. No customers had entered the store, and it looked like there was only one employee. “Fuck it,” he said, picking up the gun.

As he stepped onto the parking lot, a black BMW sped past him and parked in front of the store. Keep going, he thought as he accelerated toward the door. Joe leapt out of his car and almost ran into the store. Will followed

him. Joe ran up and down each aisle like a mouse in a maze.

“How’s it goin’?” the tall, pimpled clerk said to Will as he walked by.

Will headed for the magazine rack at the far end of the store.

“Do you guys carry typing paper?” Joe asked the clerk.

“You just passed it. Down to your right.”

“What about candles for a cake?”

“Can’t help you there.”

Will looked around, turning pages of a music magazine. Joe walked to the back of the store and pulled a gallon of milk out of the cooler. Will watched him from the corner of his eye and put down the magazine. They both headed for the counter, Joe reaching it first.

“Will that be all?” the clerk asked Joe.

Will pulled out the gun and shouted, “Back the fuck up!”

Joe stood frozen.

“I said back the fuck up!” Will shouted, pressing Joe’s chest with the nose of the gun.

“Please don’t kill me,” Joe pleaded, backing away from the counter.

“Stop and shut the fuck up,” Will said. He pointed the gun at the nervous clerk. “And you, take all the cash out the register and put it on the counter. And if you push that damn alarm, I’ll blow your fuckin’ head off!” He pointed the gun at Joe and shouted, “Don’t you fuckin’ move!”

“I won’t—I promise I won’t,” Joe cried.

“Faster!” Will shouted at the clerk.

“I’m sorry, it’s my first time,” the clerk said, his hands shaking.

“You look like you’re well off,” Will said to Joe. “Put all your cash on the counter. Slowly.”

The front door flung open and two police officers dove inside. “Drop your weapon!” the thin one shouted as he slid on the floor, pointing his gun up at Will.

Will shoved a pile of bills into his pocket and grabbed Joe around the neck as Joe tried to run away. Will pulled Joe in front of himself and used his body as a shield. The clerk dropped behind the counter. Will placed the gun against Joe’s temple and shouted, “Drop ‘em or I’ll shoot him!”

“Oh, my God,” Joe cried. “Please don’t kill me. I don’t wanna die.”

“Release the hostage and no one will get hurt,” the overweight cop said nervously, kneeling next to the thin cop.

“Please help me,” Joe pleaded.

“Shut the fuck up!” Will shouted in Joe’s ear. “Step the fuck back and

let me outta here!” he shouted at the police.

“Just calm down and think about what you’re doing,” the thin cop said calmly.

“I know what the fuck I’m doin’. I’m tryin’ to get the fuck outta here. Now move the fuck back!”

Joe screamed, “I don’t wanna die!” and tried to pull away. Will grabbed Joe around the stomach with the hand that held the gun--and accidentally squeezed the trigger. Joe went limp and fell to the floor.

“Fuck,” Will said, looking down at Joe, who was clenching his stomach and screaming. Before Will could look up, his chest was filled with bullets. Will opened his eyes, but he couldn’t see anything. He tried to get up, but he couldn’t. His entire body was numb. He tried to shout out, “What’s happening?” but nothing came out. “Oh, my God. Am I dead?” he asked as he felt himself being lifted upward. “God, no. I can’t be dead. Please don’t let me be dead. I can’t be. My baby needs me. Give me a second chance. God, please, I need a second chance.”

The dense darkness that surrounded him slowly turned to light. He could see hundreds of people around him: people of all races. Some wept, some smiled with anticipation. Everyone was nude, but no one seemed to mind. They seeded like Adam and Eve were before they bit into sin: without shame or lust. As Will was placed in a standing position, the people around him began to fade.

A flash of light caused him to look up. An enormous outline of a human, without sex or race, stood before him. Will fell to his knees and dropped his head.

“For whom do you weep?” a thunderous voice echoed from the image.

“My family,” Will answered. “They need me. I need them.”

“Are you prepared to face your sins?”

“Yes,” Will answered reluctantly.

The image faded and was replaced with images from Will’s past. They were played in chronological order, from his childhood to his death. Everything he had ever done when he knowingly hurt someone, either mentally or physically, was shown to him, followed by its consequence. Each scene only lasted a moment, but there were many of them. He tried to close his eyes and look away, but he could still see the surrounding images. He covered his eyes with his hands but saw through them. When he saw himself push T.J. to the floor and slap Gina, he cried out, “Please, please make it stop. I can’t take it no more. Gina, I’m sorry baby. I’m so sorry.”

The images disappeared. The large image of the human returned and said softly, "Rise, my son. You will suffer no more."

All of the pain and sorrow left Will's heart, leaving him with an odd sense of peace. The image opened its arms and hugged him, as if it had regained a long lost child. With a renewed innocence, Will felt cuddled by the mighty embrace.

x x x

Looking down at his stomach, Joe cried out, "God, I've been shot! Somebody please help me!"

"Don't worry--hang in there," the thin officer said as he knelt next to Joe.

"Bill, thank God it's you," Joe said, dropping his head to the floor. He knew Bill from church and had sold him his first house. "Get me an ambulance. He shot me."

Bill turned to the overweight officer and shouted, "Call for an ambulance!"

"Damn, this guy's messed up," the clerk said, standing over Will's body. "He's dead."

"Yeah, he's dead," Bill answered plainly.

Joe coughed heavily and spit out a mouthful of blood.

"Come on, buddy, hang in there," Bill said, holding Joe's hand. "An ambulance will be here in a few minutes."

"All I know is, I ain't cleanin' this shit up," the clerk said as a pool of blood crept toward his feet.

The voices outside of Joe's head began to fade until he could only hear his own thoughts: My God. I'm dying. I don't want to die. I'm not ready.

He felt his heart stop beating while he was being lifted upward.

At least I'm going to heaven, he thought as he was placed in the standing position.

"Are you prepared to face your sins?" the image before him roared.

"Yes I am," Joe answered confidently. He didn't feel much remorse as the images of his sins flashed before him. Most of them he expected. The final scene was of his own death. He didn't understand what he had done wrong. He was answered with his own voice as it echoed around him: "Get this nigger off of me." Every hurtful thought he ever had was played back for him in surround sound. When it was all over, he stood in silence.

As if a trap door had been opened beneath him, Joe fell rapidly into darkness. He could feel his heart awaken and pump fresh blood through his

veins. His mouth was forced open by an invisible hand. He tried to push it away, but his arms were held down at his sides. He screamed out as his jaw snapped in two and the sides of his mouth tore to each ear. His nerves were ten times more sensitive than they were when he was alive, so the pain was ten times worse. While what felt like a metal wire wrapped itself around the base of his tongue and sliced it off; his upper and lower eye lids were cut off. The wire moved to his lips and sowed them tightly together.

His fall ended on a bed of nails, one inch high and one inch apart from each other. They pierced his entire back, holding him still, with his legs slightly spread apart and his arms at his sides. As he was lifted into the standing position, a legion of screams echoed around him. A putrid stench came to him, causing him to fill his mouth with vomit. He swallowed it.

“My God, whatever I have to do to get out of here, I’ll do it. Please, please get me out of here.”

A thunderous laugh arose from behind Joe. Joe tried to turn, but his head was held straight by the nails. The voice roared, “It’s too late for that now. My brother doesn’t want you, so he gave you to me to play with.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t belong here. I’ve believed in Christ my entire life and did the best I could,” Joe said.

The voice laughed, “You fool. It’s not enough to believe. That would be too easy. You fucked up. Now your ass is mine.”

A creature more horrifying than Joe had ever imagined stepped in front of him. Its form suggested it could never walk, but it moved with great ease, its knees bent behind it as if its legs had been turned around. It had three long, sharp claws instead of toes. They scraped against the ground, screeching like nails being slid across a chalkboard with each long stride.

It stood face-to-face with Joe and hissed at him. It thrust out its serpent-like tongue and licked Joe’s lips, leaving behind a trail of saliva. It looked like a bat with a hundred pointed fangs, its eyes as red as fire. It had two horns, like a bull’s, on the top of its head. It unfolded its crippled arms and wings, exposing an alligator-like chest. Its three fingers moved like snakes and had nails that looked like spears. It thrust one of its fingers into the top of Joe’s head and laughed, “Allow me to play with your fears.” It pulled out a piece of Joe’s brain and slid it into its mouth. It looked down at Joe’s penis and said, “You won’t be needing that little thing anymore.” It bent over and bit off his penis. It chewed it into pulp, laughing in Joe’s face, then ran off into the darkness.

What do I have to do to make this stop? Joe thought. I’ll do anything. Just please, make it stop!

Beyond the many screams that surrounded him, Joe could hear scratching sounds approaching him. Rats of all sizes ran out of the darkness and onto his body. They feasted on his skin and flesh until they reached his bones. As they scattered into the darkness, his body produced more flesh and skin. A second wave of creatures quickly approached. Centipedes, roaches and large worms crawled all over him. The centipedes forced their way into his eyes, ears and nose, entering one and exiting another. While the roaches ate away his fingernails and toenails, the worms entered his anus. They journeyed through his intestines, to his stomach, burst out of his naval and then reentered his anus. The rats returned and devoured his skin and flesh. Joe's heart continued to pump fresh blood, his flesh replenished only to be eaten over and over.

Joe's house appeared before him. It was as if he were across the street and the front wall had been removed. The man who had killed Joe appeared behind the staircase, and Joe's two daughters appeared upstairs. They all moved in slow motion. Joe's wife appeared and walked past the killer, her son in her arms. The killer ripped the baby from her and shot him in the face. He threw the dead baby to the floor and chased Joe's wife around the dining room table. Joe's daughters came downstairs, but when they reached the bottom, the killer shot both of them in the chest. The killer tackled Joe's wife to the floor and ripped off her skirt and panties as she kicked and screamed. He flipped her onto her stomach and entered her from behind. She screamed out as he thrust himself inside of her.

Joe tried to scream, "Get off of her you dirty fucking nigger!" but the effort tore his lips.

The killer slit Joe's wife's neck as he reached orgasm. Then darkness fell before Joe. As the scene began to repeat itself, he begged for it to stop, but it got worse--the killer raped both of Joe's daughters before killing them.

Joe once prayed for eternal life, he now prayed for eternal death.

x x x

Will found himself among loved ones. His mother, sister, two brothers, three aunts, an uncle, ten cousins, his grandparents and many friends surrounded him. They all sang, danced and laughed as they held each other. Will turned around when he heard, "Daddy, daddy!" His eldest son was running toward him with open arms. As they hugged, Gina came to them with Quentin in her arms. They all embraced each other tightly--and forever.

Death for the Dead



“Don’t worry, Mother, everything will be fine,” Stephanie said, standing in the doorway of her home. “Danny and Kathy are already asleep, and I’ll be asleep soon. So please: go and have a good time.”

“Honey, we’re going to be late!” Frank shouted from the driveway through the open passenger’s door of his brown station wagon.

“You better go,” Stephanie said. “You know how he gets when he’s late.”

“If you have any questions, or anything happens, God forbid, call Aunt Mary,” Nancy said. “You know her number. She can be here in a matter of minutes.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Frank honked the horn as Nancy embraced Stephanie.

Nancy turned and shouted, "I'm coming!" She turned to Stephanie and said, "We shouldn't be gone too long--just dinner and a movie. Now as soon as we leave, be sure to lock the door."

"Yes, Mother," Stephanie smiled.

x x x

"Calm down, Honey," Nancy said as Frank pulled to the side of an abandoned road not far from their home.

"Calm down? It's the first time we get to go out in over a year, and I gotta deal with this crap! We may as well just cancel dinner and get something quick to eat on the way."

"If we have to, so what? At least were out. Let's try to make the best of it. Do you want me to help you?"

"No. I can manage." Frank slammed the door behind him. He flipped his tie over his shoulder, knelt beside the rear tire, and inspected it. "I thought I got all of you bastards," he said, yanking a nail out of the tread. He'd dropped a box of them in the garage earlier that day. As he walked to the rear of the car, it began to rain hard. "You gotta be kidding me," he said, lowering the back hatch. He pulled out the spare and jack, placed them on the ground. "Where in hell are you?" he said, searching for the tire iron.

A red truck with a flat bed, stopped beside Frank. "You need help?" a large, unshaven man asked from its driver's seat.

"I don't think so, but I can't seem to find my tire iron."

"Hold on a second. I got one right here." The man reached behind his passenger's seat, then parked behind Frank's station wagon, in the opposite direction, and stepped into the rain.

"Thanks a lot," Frank said as he shook the large man's hand. "I'm in a big hurry, so hopefully this won't take too long."

"No problem. You got it in park?"

"Yeah. It's in park."

"Why don't you lift it? And I'll take the bolts off."

Frank placed the jack beneath his car.

The large man stood behind Frank, raised the tire iron, and struck the top of Frank's head. Frank collapsed against the car. Nancy screamed as the large man whacked Frank again. She leaned over and locked the driver's side door. The large man laughed at her and smashed the driver's window with the tire iron. She unlocked and opened the passenger's door and tried to

escape, but he grabbed her leg and pulled her inside of the car. He beat her on the head with the tire iron until she lay still.

The large man yanked the keys from the ignition and shoved them into his pocket. He dumped everything out of Nancy's purse, but found nothing of interest. He searched Frank's pants pockets and pulled out the wallet. He opened it, discovered one hundred and fifty dollars in cash, shoved the money into his pocket, and lowered the back hatch of his flat bed. He lifted Frank with ease and laid him in the back of the truck. "You and me gonna have lots a fun," he said to Nancy as he pulled her limp body out of the car. He placed her beside Frank and covered them with a large tent.

x x x

Reading a Nancy Drew mystery in her bed, Stephanie heard the back door open. She placed the book on the bed, walked downstairs, and pushed open the door that led to the kitchen. "What did you forget?" she asked as she stepped into the kitchen--and she felt someone grab her neck from behind and pushed her face-first to the tile floor. She reached back and poked her assailant in the eye.

"You stupid bitch!" a man's harsh voice shouted from behind her.

She felt the man's hands tighten around her neck. He slammed her face against the floor until her neck snapped.

x x x

Stephanie awoke and rose to her feet. "No!" she shouted, seeing herself on the floor before her. She knelt on one knee and shook her body. "This can't be happening," she cried. "The children!" she shouted, and she ran out of the kitchen, toward the stairs.

"Mommy?" Katherine asked from the top of the stairs.

"No," Stephanie cried. "It's me, honey." She knew Katherine was dead also, because Katherine looked like someone had drawn her in pencil but hadn't colored her in. Stephanie could see her, but could also see through her.

"Where's mommy?" Katherine asked.

"She went out with Daddy," Stephanie answered as she darted up the stairs. "Is Daniel in his room?" she asked at the top. She lifted Katherine and placed her against her hip.

"I don't know," Katherine answered.

Stephanie looked toward the end of the hallway. Her parent's bedroom door was open, and she could see a large man wearing overalls hurling dresser drawers onto the floor.

"Is Mommy coming home soon?" Katherine asked.

Stephanie turned and said, "I think so." She passed her bedroom and stopped in the doorway to Daniel's room. The door was open. "Daniel, get over here!" she shouted, placing Katherine's face against her shoulder.

"What happened?" Daniel asked, standing next to his bed, staring at his bloody corpse, its throat slit like a sliced grape.

"Something bad," Stephanie answered. "Come on. We have to go."

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked, following them into the hallway.

"To find Mom and Dad," Stephanie said.

"Yeah!" Katherine shouted.

"Who's that?" Daniel asked as they walked down the stairs.

"A very bad man," Stephanie answered. At the bottom of the stairs, she raced toward the front door. She opened it and fell. "Are you all right?" she asked Katherine, who had fallen beside her.

"I'm fine," Katherine answered. "How come we can't go outside?"

"I don't know," Stephanie said, and she rose to her feet. She turned to Daniel, who was punching and throwing himself against an invisible wall, and said, "Danny! Take your sister into the den and watch TV."

"What are you gonna do?" Daniel asked, kicking the wall.

"Try to find a way out of here."

"Let me go with."

"I need you to stay with your sister," Stephanie said. She leaned over and whispered in Daniel's ear, "She needs someone to protect her in case that man comes down here. Can I count on you, big guy?"

"Don't worry, no one's gonna hurt my sister when I'm around," Daniel said. He took Katherine by the hand and led her to the den at the rear of the house, beneath the stairs.

Stephanie ran into the kitchen, opened the back door, and found another invisible wall. She tried to escape out of the windows, but she came to the same results. She leapt up the stairs. At the top, the man moved toward her from her parents' room with some of her mother's dresses draped over his shoulder.

"You bastard!" Stephanie shouted. "Why have you done this?" She swung at him with both fists as he walked past her and down the stairs. The man glanced at the open front door, then dashed into the kitchen.

Stephanie opened every window on the second floor--only to find she and the children were trapped inside the house.

x x x

“Did someone forget to close the door this morning?” a woman shouted from the front of the house. “Nancy?”

“Mommy!” Katherine shouted, and she jumped off the couch. “We’re in here!” She sprinted toward the closed door of the den.

“Kathy, no!” Stephanie shouted, and she leapt in front of the door from a chair that stood next to it. “It’s not her.”

“Then who is it?” Daniel asked, staring at the TV.

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna go see. Stay in here with Katherine.” Stephanie turned to Katherine. “Honey, watch TV with your brother, and I’ll be right back.”

“Is Mommy coming home soon?” Katherine asked.

“I hope so,” Stephanie answered, and she kissed Katherine on her forehead.

Stephanie entered the front room and heard the woman scream from the kitchen, “Oh my God, no!”

Stephanie ran into the kitchen, stood beside the woman, who was sitting on her feet beside Stephanie’s body, and shouted, “Aunt Mary! Where’s Mom and Dad?”

“My Lord,” Mary said, turning Stephanie’s body over. “What happened?”

“Some bastard killed us!” Stephanie shouted. “Do you know where Mom and Dad are?”

“My sweet little angel,” Mary wept as she stroked Stephanie’s cheek.

“Please, listen to me!” Stephanie cried.

Mary sprung to her feet, pulled the phone from the wall, and dialed.

“Where are they?” Stephanie cried, and she fell to her knees.

“My niece has been murdered,” Mary said into the phone. “At my sister’s house on Calumet. Seventeen--twenty-nine. I don’t know, but when I got here the door was wide open. Oh, my God, Danny and Katherine--my nephew and younger niece. Lord, please let them be all right. Please hurry.” She returned the phone to the wall and ran out of the kitchen.

“Don’t go up there!” Stephanie shouted. She followed Mary out of the kitchen, but stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“Why?” Mary cried from upstairs. “They’re just children!” She covered her mouth with her hand, rushed downstairs, out of the house, and into her

car, which was parked in front.

x x x

“Was it Mommy?” Katherine asked Stephanie, who entered the den without opening the door.

“No, it was Aunt Mary,” Stephanie answered.

“Can I go see her?”

“No, she left. Can I talk to you guys for a minute?” Stephanie asked, moving toward the TV.

“They’re not coming back, are they?” Daniel asked Stephanie as she turned off the TV.

Stephanie knelt on the floor before Katherine, who sat beside Daniel on the couch, and asked, “Do you remember the fish that Daddy won for you at the fair last year?”

“Yeah,” Katherine answered.

“Remember what happened to it?”

“Mommy said he died.”

“Yes, honey, he did. And so did we.”

“Does that mean we not gonna see Mommy any more?” Katherine cried. Stephanie embraced her and said, “No, we’ll still be able to see her.”

“How do you know?” Daniel asked as he stood and turned on the TV.

“Cause I could see Aunt Mary. She just couldn’t see me.”

“That’s if they come back,” Daniel said, returning to the couch.

“Stop it!” Stephanie shouted. “They’re coming back!”

x x x

“We found your brother-in-law’s car abandoned over on Twenty-First and Range Line,” a stern-looking officer told Mary. They stood facing each other in the living room. “You better sit down,” he said.

“No. Don’t tell me--” Mary said quietly, and she sat on the couch.

“The driver’s side window has been broken out, and the front seat and dash are covered with blood. We don’t know whose it is yet. And we haven’t found anyone in or around the vehicle.”

An officer who walked in from the kitchen moved behind Stephanie toward the rear of the house.

“So they could still be alive?” Mary asked.

“They could be,” the officer answered, pulling a small pad of paper and pen from his front jacket pocket. “You said the door was open when you arrived this morning?”

“That’s right. I come over every morning to have coffee with my sister.”

“And you found your niece on the kitchen floor?”

Mary nodded her head.

“You said that when you found her she was lying on her stomach, but you turned her over?”

“Well, yes. I thought that maybe she had fallen. Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Don’t worry about it. What was your niece’s name?”

“Stephanie. Stephanie Bradford.”

“Do you know when she was born?”

“July twenty-fifth, nineteen-fifty-six.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” the officer said as two officers walked down the stairs behind him. He turned, glanced up at them, and stepped into the kitchen. Stephanie followed him and the other two officers.

“What did you find?” the stern-looking officer asked.

“A boy and a girl, just like the lady said,” the taller cop answered. “And the parents’ room has been torn apart.”

“What about you? Find anything?” the stern-looking officer asked the officer who searched the rear of the house as he entered the kitchen.

“Just her,” he answered, looking down at Stephanie’s corpse. “And the TV in the back room was on. What do you think happened?”

“I think the parents got into a fight--”

“No!” Stephanie cried.

“And it got way out of hand. I think the husband killed his kids.”

“No, no, that’s not true!” Stephanie shouted.

“And he kidnaped his wife, got a flat, killed her in the car, and stashed her body somewhere. I bet we find her in the woods next to Twenty-Second Street.”

“No!” Stephanie shouted. She ran upstairs and into her parent’s room. She leapt onto the bed and cried into the pillow, “It can’t be your car. If you were dead, you’d be here with us.” She wept for a while, then slowly pulled herself together. She returned to the den but didn’t tell Katherine or Daniel what she’d heard.

x x x

Stephanie saw a large silver truck park in front of her house from her parents' bedroom window. She ran into Daniel and Katherine's rooms, told them to stay upstairs, and flew downstairs.

"Some of it's going to my house, which is less than a mile away, but most of it's going to my sister's in Chicago," Mary said as she entered the house. Three large men wearing blue uniforms followed her. "So you should probably load the stuff that's going there first. Why don't you start with this room? Everything but the clock is going to Chicago. I believe she would have wanted me to have it. We were extremely close. Anyway, I better see if my husband dropped off the boxes I need. I'll be in the kitchen if anyone needs me."

"What are they doing here?" Daniel asked from the top of the stairs. Katherine stood beside him.

"Aunt Mary said they're gonna take everything."

"They can't do that," Daniel said.

"Well, they're going to. What do we really need, anyway? We haven't eaten or slept in over three days."

"What about my Barbies?" Katherine asked. "Are they gonna take them too?"

"We can hide them in the basement," Stephanie said as she leapt up the stairs.

"They're not taking the TV," Daniel said.

"I don't like it down there," Katherine said quietly, staring at the floor. "It's dark and has bugs."

"What about the attic?" Daniel asked.

"I don't like it up there either," Katherine said.

"Good idea," Stephanie said. "Why don't you check it out?"

"I'll be right back," Daniel said, and he jumped up through the ceiling.

"Tell you what," Stephanie said, kneeling before Katherine. "I'll clean it up and make it our own little house with all of our favorite things. I can hang up pictures and put curtains on the windows, but I'll need some help."

"I can help you."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. We're gonna have so much fun."

"It's empty," Daniel said, landing next to Stephanie. "Except for a couple boxes full of magazines and a big wooden chest."

"Good, after we get everything up there, we can put the magazines in the chest and use it to block the door," Stephanie said. "Now remember, they can't see us, but they can see whatever we carry, so we're gonna have to do it

when they're not around. Danny, go to the basement and get the orange extension cord that Daddy uses when he's cutting the grass. Do you think you can carry the TV from the den by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Bring both of them up to the attic and make sure no one sees you carrying them."

"I'll try," he said, and he dropped through the floor as if it were quicksand.

x x x

Many people looked at the house within the next month. It was rented to a nurse, Shannon, and her wannabe musician boyfriend, Ron. She was gone most of the day, but he stayed in the house, smoking pot and writing songs he would forget with his "group" of four friends. They were desperately trying to hold onto a hippie lifestyle that was quickly fading. Sometimes they would have girls come over, and, after getting high, they would pair off and have an orgy.

Stephanie was forced to implement rules. No one was allowed out of the attic while Ron was in the house, and the bathroom and bedroom were always off limits.

Stephanie was fond of Shannon, but she grew tired of Ron's lifestyle and being forced to remain in the attic most of the time.

One morning, Stephanie gave Daniel and Katherine permission to move things around in front of Ron. She turned it into a game: whoever scared him the most could chose what they watched on TV for the next three days and nights.

Ron sat on the couch, lit his morning cigarette, and tossed the lighter onto a coffee table in front of him. Daniel picked up the lighter and waved it in front of Ron's face. Stephanie turned the TV on and off while Katherine turned the lights on and off.

"What the fuck!" Ron shouted, swatting the lighter out of Daniel's hand. Daniel picked it up and tossed it into the air. Ron covered his eyes with one hand and shook his head from side to side. He opened his eyes and shouted, "This isn't happening!" He leapt up from the couch and ran toward the stairs. Daniel grabbed Ron's leg, causing him to fall to the floor. Ron rubbed his knee, stood, and darted up the stairs. The children followed him into the bathroom. Ron tossed his cigarette into the toilet and turned on the water in the sink. Daniel pulled a towel from the bathtub and swung it at Ron.

Ron looked at himself in the mirror and saw the towel floating behind his head. He turned and backed into the corner between the wall and toilet. Stephanie turned the water in the sink off and on, and Katherine did the same with the water in the tub.

“Holy shit, this place is fucking haunted!” Ron shouted, looking down at the sink. He slapped the towel away from his face and raced out of the bathroom, down the stairs, and out the front door.

That night, Shannon returned and quietly packed. By the next night the house was empty, and the children were free to roam about as they pleased.

x x x

Two months later, the house was sold to a family much like their own. The father, Anthony, was a mechanic, and the mother, Beverly, was a housewife. They had two children, a seven-year-old boy, Tony Jr., and a nine-year-old girl, Laurie. Daniel and Katherine liked the new family and always obeyed the rules set by Stephanie. They stayed quiet, didn't move things around in front of the living, watched TV with the sound off, and stayed out of the bedrooms and bathrooms when the doors were closed.

As time passed, things around the house began to disappear. Daniel and Katherine, tired of their toys, would take things that they liked from the new children and hide them in the attic. Stephanie was angry when she first found out but realized they all needed fresh stimulation. She told Daniel and Katherine to play with the borrowed item for a while, then hide them behind a couch or in a closet, so whomever it belonged to would find it and think they'd lost it. Stephanie also began to borrow books from Beverly and Laurie.

While the living family aged, the dead children stayed the same in body and mind. Hope of their parents returning faded with each passing year.

Laurie and Tony Jr. grew quickly, moved on to college, and started families of their own. Anthony and Beverly, who stayed together for the sake of their children, grew tired of constantly fighting, and divorced. Beverly lived in the house for the next seven years until her untimely death in a car accident.

x x x

“Welcome home, Mrs. Torres,” a muscular man said as he carried a thin, black-haired woman through the front door. “Do you like?”

“I was hoping it was him,” Stephanie said, running down the stairs.

“I love it,” the woman said as the man lowered her to her feet.

“Who is she?” Stephanie asked, stopping five steps from the bottom.

“Do you want to see the rest of it?” the man asked, closing the door behind him.

“I bet it’s his girlfriend,” Daniel teased from behind Stephanie.

“The only thing I want to see for the next three days,” the woman said, loosening the man’s belt. “Is you inside of me.”

Stephanie turned and shouted, “Everybody upstairs!”

“They’re gonna do it,” Daniel giggled. Katherine covered her mouth and laughed.

“I said upstairs!” Stephanie shouted.

x x x

Stephanie’s crush on Scott quickly became obsession. She sat beside him while he worked, ate, and watched TV. She would stare at his face for hours at a time. Curiosity got the best of her, and she began to break the rules she set by watching him in the shower. Whenever Debbie was home, Stephanie stayed away from them. But when Debbie was gone on an overnight job as a stewardess, Stephanie would lie next to Scott while he slept. She loved the way he grunted between snores.

x x x

Scott ran into the kitchen, picked up the phone, and said, “Hello.”

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Stephanie said as she leaned against the doorway of the kitchen with her arms crossed.

“Where in the hell have you been?” Debbie shouted. “I’ve been calling for the past two hours!”

“We needed some food, so I went to the store.”

“Is that why you’re all out of breath?”

“Yeah. Why? Is something the matter?”

“I don’t know. You tell me why it takes someone over two hours to go grocery shopping. I thought you said that since you were a writer you’d be home all of the time.”

“This is a joke, right?” Scott laughed.

“I don’t find it funny. Why do men always find shit like this funny?”

“Look, I don’t know what this is about, but the ice cream is gonna melt if I don’t get it into the freezer, so you’ll have to call me back.”

“I can’t call you back. I have to be on board in a few minutes.”

“Well then, why don’t you call me when you get to Paris? And remember that I love you with all of my heart. And whatever crazy thoughts your thinking, don’t.”

x x x

One morning, while Scott bathed in the shower, Stephanie wrote, “I love you,” on the steam covered mirror. Standing in the tub, Scott pulled aside the shower curtain, dried himself with a towel, and looked at Stephanie’s slowly fading sign. He stepped out of the tub, wrapped the towel around his waist, walked into the bedroom, kissed Debbie on her cheek, and said, “I love you, too.”

Debbie looked at him with a wrinkled brow and continued to pack.

“It wasn’t her!” Stephanie shouted at Scott. “It was me!”

x x x

Debbie burst into Scott’s office and shouted, “What in the hell is this?” She slammed the door and extended a ring in front of her.

Scott turned from his computer and shouted, “Jesus Christ! What are you trying to do? Give me a heart attack?”

“Who’s is this?” she shouted, and she threw the ring at Scott. It struck his chest and fell beside Stephanie, who sat on the floor beside him.

“I have no idea,” Scott said. He picked up the ring and inspected it. “Where did you find it?”

“In the spare room closet! So what whore did you have in there? And don’t lie to me!”

“Listen, first of all, why would I ever cheat on you? Look at you; you’re a goddess.

Second of all, if I was cheating on you, why would I take her into a closet?”

“I don’t know. You can get kind of freaky sometimes.”

“Come here,” Scott laughed. He stood and tried to embrace Debbie.

“Maybe we rushed into this,” Debbie said, stepping back, pushing him away. “Maybe six months wasn’t long enough.”

“The second I saw you, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you,” Scott said, reaching for Debbie’s hand. “Now, you gotta stop thinking these crazy thoughts. It’s not healthy. It was probably left behind by the people who lived here before us, or the people who lived here before them. This is an old house.”

“You better not be cheating on me, because if you are, I’ll find out.”

“The only thing that you’ll find,” Scott said, pulling Debbie toward him. “Is that I love you and only you.”

“I’m sorry,” Debbie said, snuggling her cheek against Scott’s chest. “I just can’t stand the thought of you with anyone else.”

“Then don’t think it,” Scott said, wrapping his arms around Debbie’s waist.

“Why do you put up with this?” Stephanie asked. “I would never treat you like that.”

x x x

That night, Daniel and Katherine watched TV in the living room. Stephanie sat at Scott’s desk, wrote her feelings for him on his stationary, flew upstairs, and placed the note on his dresser. She returned to his office and read *The Green Mile*.

The next morning, Stephanie heard the front door close and returned the book to the shelf. “I wish she would never come back,” she said as she skipped into the living room.

“It wasn’t her,” Daniel said. He flew up from the couch and through the ceiling.

“Was it Scott?” Stephanie asked Katherine.

“Uh-huh,” Katherine answered. “Will you come play Barbies with me?”

“Sure. Why don’t you go up and I’ll be there in a minute?”

“OK, but don’t forget,” Katherine said, and she joined Daniel in the attic.

Stephanie rushed upstairs and into the master bedroom. Debbie was standing at Scott’s dresser, reading Stephanie’s letter. It read: “I watch you. I watch you all day and night, yet never grow tired of you. I have fallen in love with you. I wish I could control my feelings, but the heart has no boundaries. All I can do is yearn, because I know that we can never be together. Still, I pray that one day you will be mine and I will be yours.”

“Put that down!” Stephanie shouted. “It’s not for your eyes!”

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Debbie shouted as she tore the letter into pieces. “I knew it! I knew I couldn’t trust you! You men are all the same! Sure you went to

visit your sick Aunt in Greenfield! I bet you're with the slutty whore right now!"

"I hate you! I wish you would die, you bitch!" Stephanie shouted, and she darted into the attic.

x x x

Daniel, who was lying on his stomach, coloring a racecar he'd drawn, looked up and asked, "Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?" Stephanie said as she placed Katherine's Ken doll on the second floor of Barbie's Dream House.

"No, he has to get ready for the dinner party," Katherine said, snatching the doll from the house.

"It smells like smoke," Daniel said.

Stephanie inhaled and said, "You two stay here while I check it out."

"Hurry back," Katherine said.

"I will," Stephanie said, and she dropped through the floor and landed at the top of the stairs. "Good, leave and don't ever come back," she said to Debbie, who was walking toward her, carrying a suitcase in each hand.

Stephanie looked past Debbie and saw flames and smoke bellowing out of the main bedroom at the end of the hall.

"What did you do?" Stephanie shouted, and she followed Debbie down the stairs. "You can't do this! Stop! You have to call for help! Please! You have to help us!"

Debbie placed one of the suitcases on the floor, opened the front door, picked up the suitcase, and closed the door with her foot.

"You stupid bitch!" Stephanie shouted, and she slammed her fists against the door.

"The house is on fire!" Daniel shouted from the top of the stairs.

Stephanie turned and shouted, "I know!"

"What are we gonna do?" Katherine cried from beside Daniel.

"We have to put it out!" Daniel answered, and he dashed into the bathroom.

"Come down here, honey, and help me," Stephanie said to Katherine.

"Where are we going?" Katherine asked as Stephanie took her hand and led her into the kitchen.

"We need something to carry water," Stephanie answered, and she opened the two cabinets beneath the sink. She handed Katherine two large bowls and said, "Take these and follow me." She pulled out three pitchers

and flew upstairs.

Daniel was filling the bathtub with water when the girls entered the bathroom.

“I want you to stay in here,” Stephanie said to Katherine as she filled the pitchers with water from the tub.

Daniel snatched the bowls from Katherine, filled them with water, then raced out of the bathroom behind Stephanie. The fire had consumed the main bedroom and was creeping into the hallway.

“I think it started here,” Daniel said, and he tossed the water onto a pile of torn clothes that were scattered about the bed.

“I knew she was crazy, but I never expected her to do something like this,” Stephanie said, pouring water onto the bed. “I thought she’d just leave.”

After four trips to the bedroom with water, they saw that the fire had reached the bathroom.

“It’s too late!” Stephanie shouted, throwing the pitchers into the fire. “There’s nothing else we can do!”

“We can’t give up!” Daniel shouted as he filled the two bowls with water.

“Come on, honey,” Stephanie said, taking Katherine’s hand. “Were going downstairs,” she said to Daniel. “And I suggest you do the same.”

“Do what you want! I’m gonna save our house!” Daniel shouted, and he threw water into the fire, which was just outside the bathroom door.

Stephanie and Katherine rushed into the kitchen. “What’s gonna happen to us?” Katherine cried.

“I don’t know,” Stephanie said as she sprayed the kitchen door with water from the sink.

Daniel flew through the kitchen door and shouted, “It’s taking over the house! We have to get out of here!” The fire followed him into the kitchen. He ran toward the back door and opened it, but the invisible wall stopped him.

“The basement!” Stephanie shouted. “Everyone into the basement!”

“I don’t like it down there,” Katherine cried.

“Honey! We have to! We don’t have anywhere else to go!”

Stephanie and Katherine followed Daniel into the basement. As they huddled together in the corner, the floor above them collapsed. They screamed as flames fell onto them. When the walls that surrounded them burned to ashes, they ascended into the heavens, where they joined their parents and found peace in death.

Pleasant Dreams



Aaron opened the door to his four-room apartment, staggered into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of beer from the refrigerator, and headed for the living room. He tossed two rented videos onto a small, beaten-up table, and one of the videos knocked over an empty beer bottle that rolled off the table and onto the wooden, stain filled floor. Aaron removed the cap from the bottle in his hand and flung it onto a pile of cigarette butts that hid an ashtray. He took a long swallow of beer, lowered the bottle's mouth from his, and sighed.

He stood before a picture of Adolf Hitler taped to the center of an enormous banner of a swastika covering the entire wall. He saluted the picture while rubbing the top of his bald head with the bottom of the beer bottle. He smiled as he thought how grand it must have been to be a soldier in the German army during the Second World War.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself in his fantasy room. As always, the windowless chamber was cold, damp and dark. His nerdy boss from the

meat packing plant, a Jewish man whom he despised, appeared before him. Aaron smirked devilishly as he drove his right fist into his left palm.

“What do you want from me?” the skinny man asked while stepping away from Aaron, who was moving toward him.

“Your kike blood in that bucket,” Aaron answered, pointing at an iron drain in the middle of the room.

“Why?” the skinny man asked. He was wearing glasses and a tie. “I’ve always treated you fairly,” he said, backing into a corner.

“It’s not about fair. It’s about purifying.”

“Purifying what?” The skinny man began to cry.

“The Aryan race. You’re a Jew. So, you see, your blood won’t suffice,” Aaron wrapped his hands around the skinny man’s neck, flipped him to the ground, then punched and kicked him until he lay unconscious. He nailed the skinny man’s hands and ankles to the floor crucifixion style, using rusted stakes and a rock as a hammer. He smiled wildly as he dug his finger into the side of his boss’s left eye and plucked it out.

Aaron shook his head from side to side and awoke from the daydream. “Holy shit,” he laughed, rubbing his groin through his blue jeans. “I was gettin’ a fuckin’ hard on.”

He dropped himself into a tattered chair beside the small table. He placed his beer on the table and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his back jeans pocket. He slid a cigarette out of the pack and lit it with a match that had been lying on the table. He flung the match and the pack of cigarettes onto the table, then fished for the remote wedged between the cushion and the side of the chair. He aimed the remote at the TV, pressing “POWER.” He flipped through all ninety-seven channels but found nothing of interest. He extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray, forcing bottle caps and butts onto the table. He glanced up at the videos and remembered the clerk saying to him, “This video comes free with every rental today.”

The video he had rented was Schindler’s List, a movie he would watch on occasion for a good laugh. If it’s free, it’s gotta be shit, he thought as he picked up the untitled video and opened the case. The tape itself was also untitled. “What the fuck?” he said rising to his feet. He shoved the tape into the VCR and returned to the chair. He threw the empty video box onto the table, almost pushing off The Turner Diaries, his bible.

He snatched his beer from the table and took a drink. The first images from the video appeared on the screen. Lowering the bottle from his lips, he saw a picture of Adolf Hitler slowly materialize. “No fuckin’ way!” he shout-

ed, and he glanced at the picture of Hitler that hung on his wall. It was the same photo. A deep voice roared from the speakers as the picture of Hitler grew on the screen:

“It is time for one Aryan race, a time without the filth of Jews, the ignorance of niggers and the stupidity of Spics. It is a time where faggots are hung before the innocent, a time where the straight white male rules the world. The time is now.”

The screen turned to black. Then four German soldiers appeared on it. They were hacking limbs off dozens of Jewish women with machetes. Blood from severed arms, legs and heads spit in every direction. “Chop them bitch-es up!” Aaron shouted as he leapt up from his chair with his fist in the air. Three of the soldiers toasted each other on a job well-done while the fourth, in the distance, kicked a Jewish woman in the head with the heel of his boot. When her struggling ceased, he ripped his gun out of its holster and shot her twice in the back of the head. As he returned the gun to its holster, he looked at the TV screen, smiled, and motioned Aaron to join him. Wishing it were possible, Aaron smiled sadistically. As the soldier in the distance drew his knife from his belt, the screen blackened.

“What the fuck?” Aaron shouted. He jumped out of the chair and pounded the side of the TV with his fist. “It was just gettin’ good.” He placed his beer on the table and picked up the remote for the VCR. He pressed the fast-forward button, but nothing happened. He pushed the stop button, but the tape continued to play. After checking the remote for batteries, he tapped each button with his middle finger. He punched the remote with his fist, then smashed it against the wall.

As he approached the TV, a white circle appeared in the center of the black screen. He stopped and said, “What the fuck?”

“TO CONTINUE, PLACE YOUR HAND HERE” appeared above the five-inch circle. He pushed the eject button on the VCR, but it was as if it had captured the tape and wasn’t allowing it to escape.

Sliding his hand down the front of his face, he retrieved his beer from the table. He stood in front of the TV and stared at the dark screen, wondering what the soldier in the distance was doing to the woman with his knife. “Can’t hurt to try,” he said, and he took a long swallow of beer. “This better fuckin’ work,” he said, placing his open palm against the white circle.

When his hand met the screen, the entire room was filled with an intense light. He closed his eyes and turned his head away from it. He tried to pull his hand free, but it was attached to the screen. “Let me go, mother fucker!”

he shouted as he kicked the base of the TV. A jolt of electricity shot up his arm and through his body, as if he were plugged into a socket. Every muscle tightened and his teeth and eyes clinched together, and he gasped for air.

As the electricity subsided, his muscles relaxed. He began to pant heavily. He opened his eyes and found himself standing beside the soldiers from the video. "I must be fuckin' dreamin'," he whispered as the soldier beside him lifted his bottle toward him. Surprised to find the bottle still clinched in his hand, Aaron toasted the soldier and swigged the remaining beer from his bottle. "This ain't beer," he coughed, and he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. It was vodka. "And this ain't my shirt," he said, looking down at himself. He was dressed exactly like the soldiers he was standing beside. "Fuck yeah!" he shouted, and he flung the empty bottle onto the pile of dismembered bodies before him.

Feeling something tugging at his leg, he looked down and saw a bloody Jewish woman pulling his cuffed pants. Her left hand and right leg had been severed off.

"Please, please end my suffering," she begged. "I can take no more."

To free himself from her grip, he kicked her in the face. "How dare you touch me, you dirty whore," he said as he unbuckled the strap to the knife at his side. He bent over, grabbed her by her hair, and thrust the knife into her eye socket. She screamed and flopped about as he slid the knife in and out. The soldier, who stood in the distance, ran to them, knelt next to the woman, and helped another soldier restrain her by her shoulders. The other two soldiers cheered as Aaron sat on her chest and spat on her face. "Let's see you try to touch me now, bitch," Aaron said, and he sliced off one of her fingers.

A German general approached them, ordered one of the two on-lookers over to him, and handed him a folder. Aaron continued to slice off the woman's remaining fingers as the general barked at the soldier. Aaron cut open the front of her shirt and slid the knife across her breasts. As he thrust the knife into her chest, he was pushed from behind and fell onto her. "What the fuck?" he said, pushing himself off of her. "Why don't you watch what the fuck you're doin'?" he asked as he turned around.

The soldier, who was summonsed by the General, kicked Aaron in the face, knocking him unconscious.

As Aaron awoke, he could hear faint voices shouting at each other in the distance. He was lying down, nude. He tried to sit up, but his hands were restrained above his head. He attempted to stand, but his legs were tied to

the ground. “What the fuck’s goin’ on here?” he shouted as he struggled to escape. Like a fish trying to shake loose from a hook, he flopped around on the floor until he fell limp with exhaustion. Breathing heavily, he stared at the concrete ceiling and noticed the room he was in was eerily similar to the one he created in his daydreams. It was cold, damp and small--but it had one window reinforced by steel bars.

Five German soldiers entered the room through the lone metal door. They all looked the same to Aaron. Two stood on each side of him while the one who had kicked him in the face stood between his spread legs.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Aaron asked. “Is this a fuckin’ joke or what?”

“Admit it and your death will come quick!” the soldier between his legs demanded. He was holding the folder that the general had given to him.

“Admit what?”

“Admit you are a Jew!”

“A Jew?” Aaron laughed. “You think I’m a fuckin’ Jew?”

“Your great grandmother was a Jew!” the soldier shouted. “Admit it!” He drove the heel of his boot into Aaron’s groin.

“My great grandmother?” Aaron choked. “You got me mixed up with someone else. I’m one of you. I hate Jews.”

One of the soldiers to Aaron’s left spit on his face and growled, “You are not one of us! You are the dirt at Satan’s feet.”

“Admit it!” the soldier between Aaron’s legs shouted.

“I swear I’m not a Jew,” Aaron pleaded. “I don’t even know the bitch.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you have Jewish blood running through your veins.”

The soldier standing between his legs pulled out a knife and said, “I gave you a chance. Now your death will come slowly.” He handed the folder to a soldier beside him, sat upon Aaron’s lower stomach, and waived the knife in his face.

Aaron closed his eyes tightly and cried, “This isn’t real. It’s a dream. It’s a fuckin’ dream.” Feeling the cold blade slide into his chest, he opened his eyes and shouted, “This ain’t no fuckin’ dream!” He attempted to buck the soldier off of him, but that made the blade cut deeper. He tried his best to lie still while the soldier carved into his chest.

The soldier stood and spat on Aaron’s face. “Dirty Jew, portraying yourself as a German soldier. You make me sick.” He handed the knife to a tall soldier to his right.

Aaron looked down and saw the word Jew was carved into his chest.

The soldier with the knife knelt beside Aaron and sliced his swastika tattoo off of his left shoulder. He waived the severed flesh over Aaron's face and laughed.

Slowly blacking out, Aaron could hear his blood run through a drain beneath his back and drip into a bucket.

Aaron woke as he felt his nose being crushed. The soldier who had toasted him earlier was alone with him, standing above Aaron's head, smoking a cigarette. He removed his boot heel from Aaron's nose and flicked an ash onto his face. He dropped to the floor and kned Aaron's head. He took a long drag from his cigarette and spread Aaron's left eye open with his fingers.

"Please don't! Stop!" Aaron pleaded.

The soldier pressed the hot cigarette into Aaron's eye, which sizzled and snapped. Aaron screamed as tears mixed with ash dripped down the side of his face.

The soldier rose to his feet and stood between Aaron's legs. He chuckled as he freed his knife from its holster and crushed Aaron's testicles with the heel of his boot. He bent over, grabbed Aaron's testicles, and sliced them off. Unable to bear the pain, Aaron passed out.

Gasping for air, Aaron woke. One of three soldiers who stood around him removed his hand from Aaron's mouth and nose. Breathing heavily, Aaron pleaded, "Please let me go. I didn't fuckin' do nothin'."

The soldier who held a gun aimed it at Aaron's right foot and shot most of it off. He laughed as he handed the gun to a soldier to his left, who shot off the remainder of the foot. The soldier who covered Aaron's mouth took the gun and aimed it at Aaron's head.

"Go ahead! End this shit!" Aaron shouted with the gun pointed at his face.

The soldier laughed and shot him in the knee.

One of the soldiers poured vodka onto Aaron's nude body. The alcohol burned like acid as it entered exposed flesh. Aaron wailed as the three soldiers kicked and stomped on him.

Finally, two of the soldiers left the room. The remaining soldier sat on Aaron's shattered chest and forced Aaron's lungs to collapse.

As Aaron struggled to breathe, the room seemed to close in on him. He closed his eyes and said, "Please let this be a nightmare." He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the floor of his living room, feeling the full effects of the torture. Staring at the picture of Hitler on the wall, he breathed his last breath.

faces of death

Victor Cerda Jr.

Scars Publications

published in conjunction with

Down in the Dirt

the magazine revealing all your dirty little secrets

AlexRand@scars.tv

ISSN 1068-5154

Editor@scars.tv

<http://scars.tv>

829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155, USA, Northern Hemisphere,

Planet Earth, Solar System Milky Way Galaxy, the Universe

Freedom & Strength Press

the Copyright for the written pieces is retained by the author
Design Copyright © 2004 Scars Publications and Design

other publications from Scars:

Books: Sulphur and Sawdust , Slate and Mar row , Blister and Burn , Rinse and Repeat , Survive and Thrive , (not so) Warm and Fuzzy, Torture and Triumph, Oh., the Elements, Side A/Side B, Infamous in our Prime , Anais Nin: an Understanding of her Art , the Electronic Windmill , Changing Woman, the swan road, the Significance of the Frontier, The Svetasvatara Upanishad, Harvest of Gems, the Little Monk, Death in Málaga, Momento Mori, In the Palace of Creation, R.I.P., Bob the Bumble Bee, Hope Chest in the Attic, the Window, Close Cover Beofre Striking , (Woman.) , Autumn Reason , Contents Under Pressure , the Average Guy's Guide (to Feminism) , Changing Gears, the Key to Believing, Domestic Blisters, Etc., Oeuvre, Exaro Versus, L'arte

Compact Discs: *MFV* the demo tapes, *Kuypers* the final (*MFVInclusive*), *Weeds and Flowers* the beauty & the desolation, *The Second Axing* Something is Sweating, *The Second Axing* Live in Alaska, *Pettus & Kuypers* Live at Cafe Aloha, *Pointless Orchestra* Rough Mixes, *Kuypers* Seeing Things Differently, *SD/SD* Tick Tack, *Kuypers* Change Rearrange, *Order From Chaos* The Entropy Project, *Kuypers* Six One One, *Kuypers* Stop., *Kuypers* Masterful Performances mp3 CD, *Kuypers* Death Comes in Threes, *Kuypers* Changing Gears.