

THE
BOOK OF
SOULS

KEVIN MOORE

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Books Fluent
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Dedicated to Pat, my wife and Soulmate.

PROLOGUE

It's dark. We climb through a broken window to get into the abandoned boarding house. The feeling of being watched rolls over me like a wave. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Our eyes meet; before I can see a face, the floor crumbles with a loud crash beneath me.

The shock of the impact takes the breath from my lungs. I lie on the floor paralyzed, liquid pooling around my head. Blood. I gasp for air. Darkness. Complete silence except a small voice in the distance. Someone is calling my name. "I'm down here!" Only, there is no voice with which to yell; my body can't move.

This is where you die.

Click, click, click—something is crawling on the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Rats? No, it's something much larger. I look up at the collapsed ceiling above me. A skeletal horse head with a deformed skeleton human body crawls through the hole. This creature is able to cling onto the ceiling above me, which freaks me out. It makes a guttural sound, revealing its nasty teeth. I hear sounds of people talking; whispering fills the room. I can't make the words out initially, only noises, movements. Shadows circle me.

"Give me his thoughts."

"Give me his breath!"

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None of their mouths move, but their words are clear. “I want his soul!” barks the creature crawling along the ceiling.

Never have I been more terrified. I’ve fallen into the bowels of hell! Shadows descend upon me, closing in enough to touch me before a soft voice breaks through the darkness.

“Step away from the boy!”

A light in the form of a woman illuminates the area. An angel? My dead mother? No, she is dressed as a nun. She moves toward me, bringing light with her.

I hear a chorus of voices. “Don’t listen to that bitch!” “Witch!” “Poisoner!”

Her light opens a portal to another time and place. Suddenly, we are all in a large kitchen. My body lies still on the floor. Yet, I am also sitting at the dining room table. The most frightening, surreal feeling washes over me, the feeling of watching one’s lifeless body on the floor while being completely aware of it. Sitting with me at the table is a very large man, a pregnant woman, and two shadows. One of the shadows has beady yellow eyes, but the other one lacks facial clarity. The woman at the table is extremely docile, her head down, like she is filled with shame. Maybe fear—like me?

The nun is dressed in full habit—a uniform from an earlier time. She stands with her back to us, cooking or brewing something on the stove. The skeletal creature immerses its nails in the ceiling; it is watching, waiting. “Be careful, Jack. She’s a witch!”

Really creepy laughter follows. There are shadows all over the room, jumping on and off the walls. Two more demons crawl through the hole in the ceiling. My body is on the floor between the table and the nun. Several of the shadows slide along the floor toward my lifeless body. Clearly, I’m dead. How else can I observe this madness? Surely, this is hell. The nun’s head spins one hundred eighty degrees. “Leave that boy be!” The sound of her neck cracking as she speaks gives me the fucking willies. I have never been more alone. Shadows slide away from my body and jump back on the walls.

Two of the demons crawl down the wall onto the ground. Their bony tails swinging back and forth. One of them stands up straight and eyes me; it must be seven or eight feet tall. I avert my eyes. Another one drags its body close to the ground, inching toward me. The creature is aggressive, now very close, smelling me. Its tongue moves in and out like a serpent; it is the only

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part of its body not made of bones.

I piss myself. It comes out of my body lying across the room, not the me sitting at the table. The creature puts its mouth to my ear, speaking in a foreign language. It smells like burnt flesh. She does not speak but moves at warp speed. Grabbing the creature by its tail, she swings it off the wall. Its bones shatter all around the room.

The nun leans down to me and whispers without moving her lips. "It can only live off fear; if you don't allow it to seize your fear, it will starve." All of our communication is done mind to mind.

She then turns to the two remaining demons. "You don't know if you are a horse or a human? So, I'll treat you like a dog. Lay down!" They do as instructed.

"Where am I?" No answer. "Am I dead?" I ask.

This gets the creatures up, roaring like it's feeding time. The shadows begin to run and jump on and off the walls like they are riding a carousel. Music begins to play a disjointed melody.

"I'll make you some tea," the nun says calmly.

"She's a witch, Jack!" "That's a potion! Don't drink it! She'll poison you!" "You will end up like us!" More creepy laughter.

My body has shown no signs of life since wetting itself. I'm sure that it will never move again. The big fat man stands up at the table, exposing himself. The nun's head spins again with the same cracking, bone-chilling sound. I'm no longer sure of who or what I am more afraid of, only that I am afraid of everything.

I shiver. Ice cold—must be to keep the dead from rotting. Although it doesn't help with the nasty smell. I thought hell was supposed to be hot!

"Sit down and put that away!" the nun demands. "Until we clean you, you will be staying put!" Then in a much softer tone, she says, "Don't you want to go home? Back to your creator?"

The man sits, shrinking exponentially smaller, until he is the size of a doll. "There, there, you must feel better now," she says in her soft voice.

"She's a witch!" the shadows yell. "Stand up and whip it out! Show her your dick!"

The nun ignores them and brings me a cup of tea. "It's very hot; let it sit."

Looking up at her, I ask, "Is this hell?"

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A choir of voices screeches at me. "It's hell! You're dead!" "Dead, Jackie boy!" "Horrible boy you are!" Creepy laughter follows.

The two shadows sitting at the table begin pounding on it so hard that it makes the table come off the ground, scaring the pregnant girl. "You belong in hell! Hell, Jack! Don't fight it, boy! It's much warmer there!" they shout at me. The nun grabs hold of the beady-eyed shadow like it is a rag doll, shaking it. She throws it against the wall. The splattered shadow becomes nothing more than a giant ink spot.

The nun bends down to speak to me. "They feed off your thoughts, your memories, your worries. Don't give them anything to eat."

I am so frightened I can't control what I'm feeling, thinking. My thoughts run wild; is it too late to catch myself? My father comes to mind. How will he handle my death? "You're going to hell, Jack, for what you did to your father!" yells the other shadow at the table.

"Splat!" The nun fires him off the wall. Another chorus of "Witch! Witch!" begins. "Drink your tea. It will calm you till they get here." Her voice is hypnotic.

I am so confused. Who's coming? Angels? More demons? Creatures? Is this purgatory? Am I going to hell?

Erase the thought, Jack. Don't think!

A stampede of people run through the abandoned boarding house. "Where is he?" Flashlights. "Don't go upstairs; the floor's not safe." "I found him; he's in here!"

Firemen and paramedics come into the kitchen, but they are in the deserted part of the room where my body has landed. The living stand in that empty room in a condemned boarding house. The dead, however, are still in the old kitchen, where a battle is raging. The nun stands by me at the table. "Witch!" Shadows jump off the wall in a threatening fashion. "She's a no-good fucking witch!" they yell.

"Go back to your body, Jack," she says firmly. She does not move her lips, but the command clearly comes from her.

"Isn't the body dead?" I ask.

"It is somewhere in the in-between. Now, go back to your body." She speaks with a sense of urgency.

I get up from the table. "Am I going to die?"

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“That’s between you and God. Go.”

Standing like a baby fawn, I wobble—can’t trust my legs. “Can you come?” I beg her. My trust is completely in her now.

“No, I need more time with these three.” Looking around the table, I see the woman has given birth to her baby, which appears to be stillborn. The man remains as small as a doll sitting in the chair. Shadows have circled my motionless body. “We will never let him go!” they yell. “Never!”

I walk forward, dizzy as a drunkard, afraid to let go of the table. I call out to the nun as I stumble. “They’ll get me!”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil! For Thou art with me,” the nun intones. “Go, Jack. Call on the Holy Spirit to light your way. They will move.”

Shadows continue jumping on and off the wall to their carousel of dizzying music. “Don’t let them touch you, attach to you,” the nun adds.

I move back to the chair filled with fear. What does that mean? Attach to me?

“Pray it with me, Jack,” she says firmly. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.”

I grab hold of the table and get up, using it as a crutch, taking baby steps toward my body. This is my mountain—my Everest. If I don’t get back into my body, I fear I will be lost. “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...” Closer. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death I will fear no evil.”

My body is in complete darkness as I repeat the lines from Psalm 23 over and over. It becomes my mantra. Finally, a soft light leads me. It is coming from inside me...my light...God’s light.

Shadows step back into the darkness, away from my body. The nun disappears into the astral plane. Sounds of sirens float somewhere in or above my head.

I can’t stay awake. I close my eyes.

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It is a typical morning in the Kelly house. Katherine is up first and has all the kids' lunches ready. I make coffee and finish scrambling eggs. We are both dressed and ready for another action-packed day. We love it and feel blessed—but of course we complain like every other married couple in America with children and full-time jobs. All we want is another hour of sleep, or to finish reading the books on our nightstands.

Stevie, my oldest, comes bouncing into the kitchen dressed for school, fresh from a shower. Now twelve, he has decided he is too old to shower at night. He wants to look good for a girl at school, I think, but when I say that he rolls his eyes and says, “Dad—really?” He spent the summer in soccer camp determined to “rule” the soccer season. Katherine and I have to peel off his uniform at night. “Mom, you remember I have practice today at 4, right?”

Katherine points to the white board on the kitchen wall with the schedule for September 19. Today. Topping the list in Stevie's handwriting is “Steve—Soccer practice—4 p.m.”

Katherine is the most organized person I know. After dinner she gets out her smart phone where she keeps her schedule, and has each of our three children write down everything they need. Cookies for bake sale, soccer practice, piano lessons...

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Mike, my youngest, comes into the kitchen looking for his backpack—not a surprise. I point to the coat rack where it is hanging. “No, I switched that one out with the new one grandma gave me.” I shake my head and put some eggs on a plate for him. “Where did you leave it last?” This helps no one. Katherine, Stevie, and Mike all speak at the same time: “If I knew where I had it last, I wouldn’t be looking for it.”

Lilly comes bouncing into the kitchen, her ponytail swinging behind her. “Dad, the bird’s back. He’s tapping on the window again.”

A couple of weeks ago, the same bird started tapping at the top of our living room window. The windows are long and wide, designed to bring the outside landscape inside the house. It looks like a robin, but I’m no bird expert. Every night at dinner—tap, tap, tap. Really annoying.

I shoo it away, but it keeps coming back, on a mission, like a carrier pigeon with a message from a long-lost friend.

“Mom, can I have the keys to the car?” Mike asks. “Maybe my backpack is there.”

Mike goes out to the car, leaving the front door open. Our tapping bird flies into the living room like a kamikaze pilot. “Dad! The bird is in the house!” Lilly yells.

“Mike!” Stevie yells. Just like that, our typical morning is no more.

Chaos ensues with the bird flying all around the living room. It quickly becomes a circus. Mike comes back in with his backpack, closing the door. “No! Open the door!” we all yell.

We scatter about, opening doors, taking the screens off the windows. Katherine has a broom but won’t actually whack or threaten the bird with it. Stevie’s idea is to play music very loud so he blasts music like the bird is a prisoner of war and we’re trying to get him to crack. His music is so loud it reminds me of the the “Ride of the Valkyries.” The bird keeps dive-bombing us to the blaring music. It seems to have an intention.

“Turn the air conditioner on—no the heat!” I yell, hoping the heat from the vents will make the bird fly lower and realize it has multiple escape routes.

The boys are yelling “Get him!” to which Lilly replies, “How do you know it’s a him?”

“We don’t care what sex he is—we just want him out of the house,” Stevie replies.

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Lilly decides she is going to Google how to tell the sex of a bird. Katherine concludes the music may be disorienting him or her, which may be why the bird can't find the open door or window.

Our next-door neighbor is standing in the living room, which we don't realize until we shut the music off. She startles us all. Apparently, she has been trying to get our attention over the music.

"What's wrong? What's happening!" she yells. Then she sees the bird flying around the room, shakes her head in horror, and steps back toward the open front door, like she may run.

I take the broom from Katherine and try to get the bird out of an open window without hurting him. He's not having any of it and flies directly at me in attack mode. Our neighbor begins to recite, "Birds crashing into windows, houses, or cars are supposed to bring news of death. They are omens." Without taking a breath she adds, "Birds looking in the windows or tapping at windows can also mean someone from the other side is trying to contact you."

"Maybe it's Grandpa," Mike says.

Everyone stops, including me. "What?"

Our neighbor and Mike start to talk at once, but Katherine stops them. "It can also mean that the bird has simply wandered in. Let's drop this silliness and get the bird out of my house."

Our neighbor heads out the front door. "Good luck," she shouts ominously.

"Hey, she didn't tell us what it means if the bird is in the house," Stevie says.

Finally, I catch the back of the bird with the broom, sending him or her out the rear door. It lands in a tree and eyes the house, as if to say, "I'm not done with you guys." We put the screens back on, close all the doors, and laugh.

The bird doesn't leave. It comes back to the living room window and begins tapping. "You need to squirt him with the hose, Dad," Lilly says. "A bird in the house can also mean death, according to this website."

We are running late, so I hold the front door open as everyone files out. Katherine gives me a kiss. "Don't forget to pick up the Midrin; the pharmacy called again."

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Yes, I keep forgetting because it's been a while since I had a migraine headache. I'd like to believe these killer migraines of mine are not coming back, but it may be false hope. As the kids get in the car with Katherine, she turns to look at me. "You still want to have the Midrin just in case you get one. You know how nasty they can be." The woman reads my mind.

"I'll get it."

We go off to our separate lives, where we are known and judged individually, not as the Kelly clan. At the end of the day, we will take turns talking about our days at dinner. Katherine always starts the dinner conversation by going around the table: "Tell me about the best part of your day." We always start with the youngest, Mike. Then she'll ask, "Does anyone have a problem they would like the family to help with?" Communication. We want them to be able to rely on one another.

Katherine is an only child. I had a brother, Brick, who suffered a very bad accident that almost killed him as a kid. He survived but died a young man in the first Iraq War. My dad, God bless his soul, always said it was God's will. Whoever's will it was, it left me brother-less and basically an only child.

My morning at work is uneventful, but the afternoon takes a turn for the worse, as if this morning's conversation was foreshadowing. The afternoon begins with the start of a wicked migraine. No amount of Tylenol will help. Damn it, I should have picked up the Midrin. This one comes with such a vengeance that it immobilizes me. I ask my secretary not to disturb me, close my office door, and pull down the shades. I fall into a deep sleep, trading this headache for an afternoon dream.

Music plays, but I can't make out the tune. I dream about my father—how happy we all were when he moved to California. We are walking on the beach, and then somehow, we become separated by the water, he on one side, the rest of us across from him on a different beach. The water grows wider and wider between us. He continues to call my name, but I can't get to him. I begin to panic. Opening my mouth to yell, nothing comes out. He's gone...

I sit around a table with ten people in my conference room. At first, I am not sure if it is a dream or if it is real. I am leading a client meeting, which I typically do. A bird slams into the window, embedding itself into the glass, startling all of us. More birds begin slamming into the window, creating a panic. My clients stand up, looking at me, wanting me to do something.

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Again, I try to speak, but the sound of the birds hitting the glass drowns me out. People begin to rush out of the room, leaving their folders and briefcases behind. I try to stop them but I am too tired. So, I continue to sleep—to dream.

My brother Brick and I are laughing and running down 2nd Avenue in New York like we always did as kids. Brick has not been in my thoughts in such a long time. Someone calls our names. I turn to see who is calling us, but no one is there. When I turn back, Brick is gone and I'm left standing alone on 2nd Avenue—no people, no cars.

An explosion of ringing phones makes me stir, but I incorporate them into my dream. They won't stop: The office line rings, and my cell phone keeps going off in an urgent fashion. I wake up. I'm still in my office, my feet up on the desk. I look around, clear my head, and pick up my cell phone, which has blown up with multiple missed calls and texts. Text after text tells me to come home. They're all from Katherine.

My heart races. I call home. "Where are you?" she asks, highly agitated. "You need to come home!"

"What's wrong?" My voice, like me, is groggy.

"Stevie came home from soccer practice not feeling well; he has a temperature."

"Maybe he caught something at school," I ramble—something I do when I can't concentrate.

"Come home. He's never sick; you know that." She speaks in a worried tone I have not heard since my father's heart attack.

I look at my watch and think the time must be off; it reads 7 p.m. "Is it really 7 o'clock?"

She pauses. "Jack, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I just lost track of time." Katherine doesn't need to know I've been asleep in my office for the past five hours with a migraine.

Here's the thing: you never know how happy you are in your mundane everyday life until it changes for the worse. By the time I get home, Stevie's fever rages at 103. He is vomiting. It worsens. A convulsion? Maybe a seizure?

Before the night is over, we rush him to the hospital. The hospital is worse than the DMV. We wait.

The doctor is keeping him for observation. Observation? He's sick, damn

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it. Do something! We wait for a room, but soon the whole situation goes upside down. They're sending him to ICU immediately. He's twitching, convulsing, they think he may be bleeding internally. Intensive care requires constant; close monitoring and support from special equipment and medications in order to ensure normal bodily functions.

Critically ill? How can a normal boy who when I left this morning was healthy as ... as what? He was the picture of health. The doctor in ICU asks us the same questions as the doctors in the ER. "Did he fall? Did he get hit with something in the head? Have you been out of the country? Were you camping recently? Did you notice any kind of bug bites?"

No. No. No. No.

Sitting in ICU amidst the sound of machines breathing for your child is as scary, as haunting a sound as you will ever hear. Everyone and everything has a smell. Including me. Katherine and I touch his feet because that is the only part we can touch. ICU doctors and nurses are swarming him. They move in and out of our room in a constant procession, running tests and taking blood. All his numbers are crazy bad—off-the-charts bad. He is under attack. A bacterium? Maybe a virus? No one seems to know.

They start talking about quarantine and decide he needs to be isolated. "Quarantine?" I ask. Katherine holds on to me tightly.

"It's just a precaution," the doctor says. "Until we figure out what's wrong here."

At first, they tell us we can't go in his room. I get crazy. "Give me gloves, give me a mask. I'll sign a disclosure but let me in with my kid! This is bullshit! You don't even know what's wrong with him."

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October begins the way September ended, with Stevie deathly ill. He's off the respirator, which is great, but his skin color is gray, and he doesn't recognize us most of the time. His eyes roll back in his head, and his body is limp. Turns out Stevie may have contracted some kind of bacteria that attacked his brain, and he is now fighting for his life. Katherine and I are the only ones allowed to see him. We play music, read to him, speak to him, plead with him to fight. "Stevie, don't give up, baby; we're here waiting for

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you!”

It began here. All those things you think don't really exist. Ghosts, spirits, demons—they come calling.

After Katherine drives home to be with Lilly and Mike, I take the night shift, sitting next to the bed, holding Stevie's limp hand. His grip tightens intensely as his eyes open. “Dad, don't leave me. Don't let go of me.”

It is the first time in weeks he's spoken. His voice is weak, but clear. His eyes look straight at me.

“I'm here,” I whisper. “I'm not going anywhere.”

He blinks. I turn to bring the chair closer, but his grip won't let me move. “Good,” he said, “because they keep trying to take me out of here.”

“It's probably just for tests,” I say, brushing his hair back.

Stevie looks up at me, frightened, and shakes his head. He can't keep his eyes open. “Don't worry; I'm not going anywhere,” I add.

We hold hands all night. Once in a while, he tightens his grip, and I gently squeeze back. I think of my father. Brick had fallen through the ceiling in an abandoned building when he was a kid in New York City. The fall almost killed him. My dad wouldn't leave his side. We had no mother; she died of cancer when we were four and six. Dad never really spoke about it until I was an adult. So, it was my dad alone with Brick in the hospital. I've built up five weeks of vacation at work and another three weeks in personal/sick time. I take it all.

When Brick started to improve, Dad would come home, sit with a cup of tea or a Scotch, and just stare. “Jack,” he said, “you need to pray. He may never walk again.”

Brick did walk again because Dad would not let him give up. Now, I have to make sure Stevie doesn't give up.

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Tonight is the first time they come to visit. My head snaps forward, startling me awake. The room is dimly lit. Something is not right. It takes me a bit to focus but I see shadows moving slowly along the wall, moving quietly around the room. Hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. No one

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but Stevie and I are in the room. He tightens his grip. I'm not sure what I'm seeing. I stand up, and the shadows begin to pulsate. There is some kind of force in the room. They start to make sounds like cicadas, like the humming of a high-tension power line. Matching the electrical feedback, the room starts to spin like a carousel, faster and faster. Suddenly, the shadows begin to jump off the walls in three-dimensional form. Not people—shadows.

Stevie's eyes pop open. Fear washes over his face. "Don't worry," I whisper. "You're not going anywhere." Dear God, what is this? Keep them away from him!

One or two jump back onto the wall, but one stands close to the bed. He has no eyes—well, not human eyes. No face or body features, either, just a dense shadow that changes form in front of me. I'm too frightened to speak, to breathe. How can I protect my boy from this?

The lights come on, chasing them from sight, but they leave a chill in the air. The temperature in the room is much colder. Looking around, I can sense they are still here, hiding.

"Are you all right?" the nurse asks.

Sweat forms on my lip while I shiver from the chill in the room. "Yes. He opened his eyes, spoke to me; that's good, right?" I speak with a cotton mouth.

She looks at me strangely, rubbing her arms. "Why is it so cold in here?" she asks.

Still scared, I shrug. The nurse walks over to the controls and turns the air down. "It must be broken; I'll have maintenance take a look."

You know the saying "time stood still?" Well, it doesn't; it actually moves faster. It flies by without Stevie showing any real improvement. The doctors are now pretty sure it is bacteria in his system. They tell us it may cause him to hallucinate, which is why he keeps thinking someone is after him, trying to take him. What is my problem? Am I hallucinating? I felt and saw the same thing but I told no one. Not even Katherine.

The shadows come back the next two nights. I start leaving the lights on, which the nurse opposes. "He needs to rest," she says. That's all he does, I think. I resort to watching a movie on my iPad and sipping tea.

Suddenly, everything in the room goes dark, including the iPad. Music starts to blare, but it isn't just one song; it's like someone keeps turning the

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radio dial, so you hear one or two notes. Lights in the room flick on and off.

The warped figures of shadows slide down the wall and across the floor—big ones, small ones, distorted ones. Heat permeates from the walls and floor. I grab the iPad to take a picture of what I am seeing in order to show Katherine, but the screen pulsates; it's so hot it burns my hands, and I drop the iPad to the floor. Stevie shoots up in bed, startling the crap out of me. I knock everything off his bed tray onto the floor. One of the shadows jumps off the wall and moves toward me, growing larger and bolder, forcing me to back up.

Stevie grabs hold of my arm. I climb onto his bed and try to protect him with my body. "Don't let them take me, Dad," he whispers as the sounds in the room get louder and louder.

The room goes quiet. As quickly as they arrived, the shadows disappeared, leaving me exhausted but unable to sleep.

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Stevie shows some improvement over the next two days. He is confused a lot but is awake much more often and for longer periods of time. He takes drinks of water, although he rarely speaks. He is still very weak. Katherine and I barely see each other; she handles the day shift, then goes home to Lilly and Mike at night.

Katherine is standing at the nurse's station. Behind her, a nurse comes out of Stevie's room, dressed differently from the other nurses. I run my hand across Katherine's back to let her know I'm here, then head down the hall to his room. Stevie is moaning and squirming. Holding his little body, I say, "Dad's here. Are you in pain?"

He doesn't answer me.

"What was the nurse doing?" I ask Katherine, as she walks wearily into the room a minute later.

"Oh, as you know they keep ruling things out; he's plateauing. They want to send him home."

"Home?" I ask. She sits in the chair with the weight of a very heavy woman, which she is not. "He just needs to get a little stronger." Katherine adds.

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Stevie opens his eyes like he did that first night, with fear shining from them. Katherine sees it. He mouths the words more than he speaks them. "They were back."

Katherine looks at me. "Who was back?"

I shake my head. "No, Stevie, that was a nurse who was just in here."

"What nurse?" Katherine asks.

"No," Stevie says, gripping my hand like he is hanging from a cliff.

"A nurse came out of his room when I was walking down the hall," I say nonchalantly.

They both speak at the same time, although Katherine is louder and more forceful. "There was no nurse in this room," she says.

Stevie just says, "Nooooo."

Katherine looks at me. "The nurses on duty were all doing their end-of-shift paperwork. I was standing right there."

I hold Stevie's hand; I don't want to frighten him. I take a long breath. "Well, I saw a woman dressed as a nurse come out of this room, just moments before I walked in," I tell her. "Actually, she wasn't dressed quite like the other nurses, but it was a nurse's uniform."

Katherine stares at Stevie, and the look on her face makes me turn back to him. His eyes are wide, and he is shaking his head. Katherine gets up and leaves the room, and I turn my focus back to Stevie. Moments later, she returns with Stevie's nurse. She is not the same woman I saw. No one—not her, not any of the other nurses on the station—have been in his room during the last twenty minutes. No candy strippers or any volunteers are on this floor.

Katherine gets her things to go.

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Stevie rests through a quiet evening. The nurse comes in to take his vitals and blood for more testing. Every night is the same; they come in, poke him for blood, and tell us the same thing. Nothing. While he is resting, I take a walk. Then I see her. That nurse again, walking toward Stevie's room. She stops. Turns into another room when she sees me coming. Glancing into Stevie's room, I see our nurse is finishing up her charting.

I decided to look in the room where the other nurse entered. She is not

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in there.

Settling into Stevie's room, I play music he likes, read him some positive quotes. No shadow people. No mysterious crosses or nurses. Just us two. I've brought rosary beads and holy water and I place them on the little night table, returning to the spiritual comforts of my youth to help me fight, help me stay strong.

All hell breaks loose in the hall—a full-on code blue in the room next door. Sounds of hospital staff running in and out get me up, and I walk slowly toward the door.

Stevie's voice stops me. "They're coming."

Behind him on the wall is a shadow. Pulsating. Bigger and bigger. Running back to his bed, I turn the lamp to face the wall, hoping to prevent the shadow from forming. It continues to pulsate. Then the wall becomes a merry-go-round of shadows. A low murmur or humming begins, almost like a Gregorian chant.

"You can't have my son!" I yell, grabbing the rosary. It explodes in my hands, the beads shooting across the wall and bouncing along the floor. I drape myself over Stevie as if I can prevent the spirit world from intruding on this one, and I begin to pray.

They come with force and power. One, then two, then ten are jumping on and off the wall. Faceless. Making gurgling sounds. Pulling his sheets down and grabbing at his arms, his legs. Stevie is frightened but too weak to fight them off.

"Look at me, Stevie. Look at me! They can't hurt you!" The sound of my voice is drowned by the screams and wall banging next door. "What do you want?" I yell. "What? What do you want?"

"Him!" they say in chorus. "Him!"

I stand up. "You can't have him!" They circle me, but it is not me they want.

A lot of noise follows in the hall outside our door. I reach for the holy water and throw it at the shadows on the wall. It runs down the wall, staining it with blood.

Silence follows. The kind of quiet you can hear. The screams that previously filled the air have left their echoes behind.

I turn on all the lights in the room and look around at the walls. No

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blood. Stevie sleeps with deep breaths, a slight whistle in his exhale. As I keep vigil next to his bed, I watch a man and woman walk past our door in obvious grief. Our nurse comes in later and tells me that the teenage boy next door had died. That was the source of the commotion. All the noise and screams came from him coding, but they couldn't save him. All I want—need—is sleep, but I don't get any.

As anxious as I am to see Stevie and have some time with Katherine before we exchange shifts, I've begun to dread and fear the night in his room. It terrifies me. Still, I have not been able to tell Katherine about the nightly assaults that Stevie and I have endured. Nor how exhausted we are.

It's raining, a rarity in southern California in October. The kind of rain that tap dances along the sidewalk. There's lightning, thunder.

Lulu is the night nurse. She is new to us, nice, but ditzzy. She tells me about her boyfriends, how tired she is because she's always working. Three days at this hospital, three days at another, she says. She has two boyfriends to keep happy. Looking at her, I smile. She must be sixty—good for her. Lulu has no problem telling me how much both men are in love with her. Her stories are a nice diversion. I follow her to the door, trying to prolong her stay.

Tonight is unusually quiet except for the sounds of the storm. The halls in the hospital are empty. Lulu does not return; I wonder if she found a spare bed to take a nap. Which is what I involuntarily do while reading my book. When I wake up, the room is freezing. Frost has covered the windows; I can actually see my breath. There are not enough covers on Stevie's bed to keep him warm. The temperature says 70, but that is not possible. I ring for Lulu, or anyone really.

Lulu appears after a good ten minutes, looking very tired. She immediately tries to warm herself upon entering the room. "What did you do?" she asks, heading to the thermostat.

"Nothing."

"That can't be right."

"Look at the window."

We both walk to the window. There literally is frost on it; it has to be thirty degrees in the room. Now very much awake, Lulu leaves and returns with her supervisor and several blankets. She checks on Stevie, picks up the phone, and calls maintenance. The room becomes a circus of a different kind.

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Maintenance people come in and out, trying to figure out what's wrong. They all say and do the same thing: "Geez, it's freezing in here. It must be broken."

You think?

I'm thankful for the diversion. It is freezing, but there will be no haunting tonight. People walk in and out, more blankets, more supervisors—and then an executive decision.

"We need to move you to another room," Lulu says. The cold room enlivens her.

The new room is smaller, but warmer. Stevie and I settle in. If I could just sleep. Lulu comes into the new room to make sure we are comfortable. She walks over to me. "This is a better room. That room has a ghost." Her tone is very conspiratorial.

"Ghost?" I'm almost happy for her acknowledgment, maybe that is what we are seeing, but if it is, we are seeing more than one. "As in haunted?" I ask.

Lulu looks at me. On a different day, before Stevie got sick, I would have thought her batshit crazy, but not after what we've seen.

"Yes, a ghost. And not a friendly one," she adds.

I'm finally able to breathe. I think we're going to be fine. A weight comes off me. "Do you think I can get a cup of tea?"

"Sure," she says, and leaves the room. Within minutes the sounds start: electric humming, the cicada bug sound. When she returns the room has gotten noticeably colder. Not nearly as bad as our previous room, but colder than it was when we moved in. The sound stops—waiting for her to leave?

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Stevie has plateaued. That's hospital and insurance talk for "he isn't improving, and we don't want to spend any more money trying."

It's been six weeks in the hospital, and we're finally going home! Trust me when I say we are happy, but he is not out of the woods. There is nothing left for them to do. They are not exactly sure what happened; they blame some kind of bacteria. We are in the Middle Ages, but it is not the Black Plague, because Stevie is the only one who contracted it. It is random.

Stevie is still weak. He needs his mom and me to nurse him back to

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health. A real nurse will come by several times a week as well. They'll send a physical and occupational therapist. There might be some brain damage, which might cause problems with his motor skills. Time will tell. Still, they have no name for the bacteria that almost took his life and left him like a rag doll.

I just want to be in our house with my wife and children.

Katherine sets up Stevie's bedroom with an additional cot and a lounge chair, so one of us, including Lilly and Mike, can spend long periods of time with him. Our first night home, a few very close friends and Katherine's mom come to visit. They bring food. We even open a bottle of wine. Okay, two bottles.

Sitting in the living room, I try hard to follow the conversations, longing for the ordinary things in my life to return. Ordinary things that appear really extraordinary to me at this moment. I want them back. Like Katherine and I getting dinner on the table. Stevie dressed in his soccer uniform. Lilly in a ponytail making us laugh. Mike, always the last one at the table. Always needing to do one more thing before he sits down.

"Is that someone at the door?" I don't know who asked, but it brings me back to the now.

"What?" I ask.

"More wine?" Katherine offers.

I shake my head and get up to see who is at the door. We have a small porch between the wood door and screen door, like an old-fashioned mud room. Turning on the light, I see the screen door tapping against the door frame.

As I lock the screen door, a movement outside catches my eye. I walk off the porch to get a look. Nothing. No one. Several papers lay in the driveway; I pick them up and throw them in the trash can. That is when I see the shadow of a woman. Her outline reminds me of Mary Poppins. It looks like she is standing on the side of my house. Anger overtakes my fear, and believe me, I am afraid.

"I see you!" After yelling, I walk to the side of the house where she was standing.

No one is there. The shadow is gone.

"Oh my God! Stevie!" I run back into the house, making a commotion

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that gets everyone's attention, but I don't care. They followed us home. I swing open the bedroom door to find Mike and Lilly on the cot talking to Stevie.

"Billy keeps asking me when you are coming back to school. Hi, Daddy," Lilly says. "We're just telling Stevie how much his friends miss him."

Katherine comes in with a look on her face that says, Jack, what's going on? "Everyone okay?"

"Yes," Mike says. "We're just encouraging him—like you told us to."

Katherine turns to me. "Let's say goodbye to our guests. It's been a long day."

I don't move. Katherine touches my back, the way only she can. It speaks volumes. You are not alone. I'm here; the kids are here. It will get better.

Everyone leaves except Katherine's mom. They talk quietly in the living room. The lights are soft. While putting glasses in the sink, the sound of the screen door swinging open gets my attention. I'm glad I never greased that door. It shuts as if someone is trying to muffle the sound. I wait. Katherine looks over at me. She hears it too. Our front door opens very slowly. A woman's footsteps echo through the door. Reaching quietly for the flashlight under the sink, I watch as this female—shadow? spirit? ghost?—slides through the front door. It becomes clear to me that we are in some kind of spiritual warfare. Is it over death? Was Stevie supposed to die? I will fight and steal him from the clutches of death because I cannot let that happen.

The shadow is in the kitchen. I turn the flashlight at its center. It divides into two and seems to retreat; the divided shadows climb onto the wall in my living room.

"Stay there!" I command, as I back slowly down the hall, holding the flashlight like a gun.

My mother in-law wears a look of complete horror. Finally, someone other than Stevie and I see them. Katherine begins to walk toward me, but I keep backing up until I make it to his room. Stevie is alone and awake. "They're here, aren't they, Dad?"

I nod.

"They followed us."

Katherine looks at Stevie, and then me. "Who? Who followed us?" she asks anxiously. Neither of us answers. "Jack," she says sternly, "What is

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happening? You ran everyone out of here.” She looks at Stevie and lowers her voice. “What is this?”

“Come with me,” I finally say.

Using the flashlight, I outline the divided shadow on the living room wall. “You see them?” I ask. Katherine moves around the room to view the wall from different angles. “You see them, right?”

“Yes, but you know how people see Jesus or Buddha on the wall of a building—or piece of cheese? You said in the past that you think they want to see it, or need to see it. Is that what you’re doing here?”

“No.” Stevie says. He holds onto the side of the wall weakly. “They want something from us, Mom.”

Katherine rushes to him. “Don’t worry, Mom and Dad will take care of this. Let’s get you back to bed.”

She puts her arm around him and starts walking him back to his room. I look at the wall. It is clear to me that I see two shadows looking like the opposite sides of the same coin. We tell Katherine everything that has happened—all the shadows in the hospital, the freezing room, the noise. “I’ll take the first shift,” I say.

Stevie falls asleep. I read everything I can on spirits, sightings, people who have come close to death, or in some cases have been dead for seconds—or minutes. At some point I fall into a deep sleep until that low humming and hissing sound disturbs me. Someone—something—is in the room with us. When I open my eyes, shadows are jumping on and off the walls.

Stevie sits up, frightened. One of the shadows towers over him. I jump out of the chair, leap onto his bed, and wrap him in my arms. I yell but don’t recognize the sound of my own voice. Katherine rushes in first, followed by Lilly, then Mike. Looking into the shadow’s face, I see tiny, yellow laser-like objects that I think are eyes.

“What do you want? What?” I yell.

“Him,” it whispers as its eyes brighten. “Him!”

It screeches, leaps at us, and grabs hold of Stevie’s arm.

“No, you can’t have him! You can’t have him!”

All of us are in bed, wrapping ourselves together.

“It’s you they want, Dad,” Stevie says. He is the Stevie of old, healthy.

“What?”

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"You have to decide. It's not fair to grandpa and it's not fair to us."

The shadows hold their positions on and off the wall. I'm less afraid at the thought of them wanting me than wanting Stevie. I stand up and move away from the bed; the shadows move with me. My confusion of why they want me is fueled only by how healthy Stevie looks.

"Why is it unfair to grandpa? He's dead," I say.

My family looks at me with so much love that the reason doesn't matter. As I move farther from the bed, my mind begins to race. Did I have a stroke or an aneurysm in Stevie's room that night? Was that the code blue?

I look at Mike, who is sitting at the edge of the bed. Mike loved to be chased around the house before his bath, naked, when he was a toddler. I want to pick him up and toss him in the air like I did when he was a baby, just to hear him squeal with delight.

"Mike..."

He smiles at me and disappears. It feels like I've been punched in the solar plexus.

"Dad," Lilly says.

I gaze at her. "Lilly?" Lilly who always makes me laugh. Lilly in her ponytail saying, "Dad, let me paint your nails. I'll paint them clear."

My mind is jumping all around, remembering the day Katherine and I brought her home from the hospital after she was born.

"Lil!"

She too is gone.

Tears fall. I must be dying. Maybe it was the headache in my office the day Stevie got sick. It was so bad; I had never slept at my desk that long. Looking at Stevie now, I see him as he always was—in a uniform. If not soccer, then baseball. He looks at me with a half-smile. "It's all right, Dad."

I cry because I know it isn't.

Katherine tries to stop Stevie from leaving, but it's too late. He is gone. It is only Katherine smiling back at me now. I have no words. Is this how the process of dying works—our most beautiful important moments flickering in our hearts and minds like old movies? My beautiful Katherine, who could fix anything and make any place feel like home just as long as she was there. Oh, God. I'm still a young man; we have so much life to live. I struggle and fight to stay with her.

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Something profound and overpowering pulls at me. Stop fighting; let go. Did the shadows take me from the room? Take my soul? I begin to feel in images. Falling. Sliding backward, a salmon swimming upstream, turning around. The hell with the struggle. Just let go. It feels good. I'm dead. This must be what it's like to cross over. Water is all around me. Back in the amniotic fluid of my mother's womb. Now I'm in a stream. A pool. No, an ocean. Vacation. Katherine, the kids, and I in Costa Rica, snorkeling. Fun. Underwater, looking, swimming to the surface, light—sunlight. There is no pain, no fear.

Now I need to breathe. I swim faster and faster toward the sunlight. Air... I need air! Breaking the surface, the sunlight hurts my eyes. I need to adjust to the blinding brightness.

Someone is holding my hand. Is it my father? Holding my hand so tight, secure. "Dad? Daddy? Am I dead?"

"No. God, no, but you had me scared there for a while, Jack."

"I'm not dead?" He shakes his head. A nurse comes over—the nurse from Stevie's hospital room. The one that only I saw?

"Where's Katherine? The kids?" I ask.

"Who?" my father asks.

"My family. Katherine—Your grandkids—Stevie, Lilly, Mike?"

The nurse and my father exchange glances. Yes, I'm sure she is the nurse from Stevie's room. I realize I am in a hospital room. There are crosses and rosaries everywhere.

"Dad?" I can't get my head straight; I'm so confused. He looks so young. "Dad?"

"You had an accident, Jack; you fell through the floor of that abandoned building."

What? What did he just say?

"No. No." I struggle with my speech. "That was Brick...that was my brother, Brick. That was a long time ago when we were kids."

Again, the nurse and my dad look at each other.

"Jack, you don't have a brother; you don't have any siblings." He speaks very carefully. "It's just you and me. Brick is your friend. He's the one who ran for help. You fell, Jack."

The nurse leaves the room to fetch a doctor. I begin to cry.

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"I have a wife and kids. Katherine, Stevie, Lilly—don't you remember your own grandchildren?"

My father starts to cry. "Jaaack. Baby, you're thirteen years old. You had a terrible fall. We've got to get you better. Someday you will have a wife and kids."

Dad is talking to me, but I don't hear him. It is Katherine's voice I hear, along with Mikey's squeal. I close my eyes and feel the tears slide down my cheeks. For the first time, I feel the intense pain in my head, back, and legs. Fuck, what a wicked headache!

The nurse returns with Dr. Klein. He is serious but happy to see me alert and awake. They whisper their worries that I may never walk again. The doctor then goes into action, pulls my covers down, and begins to examine me. He touches my toes, my legs. "Can you feel this?"

"Yes."

"How about this?"

"Yes."

They are ecstatic; the nurse actually claps. My father puts his head in his hands. Is he crying? Everyone is so pleased.

"Why is everyone so happy I can feel you poke me?" I ask.

"When you were unconscious, you didn't respond to any of my touches, all the times I pricked your legs," Dr. Klein says.

I just want to go home. To California, my wife, my kids.

Dad sits down like the weight of the world has been lifted off his back.

"Pain?" Dr. Klein asks me.

"Everywhere, including my fucking ass."

Dad looks up as Dr. Klein laughs. I don't curse, especially in front of my father, or my kids. Dad would never allow it. He gets mad when I yell Goddamn, but right now I want to curse. I want to scream and rant. Nothing makes sense. Me? Thirteen? Bullshit. I'm forty-seven. None of this is right. None of it!

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It takes me a couple of days to realize it, but Dad appears to be correct—

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I really don't have a brother. Brick is a friend; he did not get hurt. Apparently, I was the one who fell through the floor of an abandoned boarding house and fractured my skull, my back, and both my legs. They were afraid I would die. Now they are afraid I will never walk again. I cry a lot, with persistent headaches that worsen if I don't take some strong medication. There's nausea. Sometimes, I vomit. One day, I thought my nose was bleeding. It turned out to be drainage. My ears also leak. I'm a real fucking catch! Oh, and I can't stop cursing; it's like I have Tourette's.

They want me up to do physical therapy. I have no interest in trying to use the balance bars, squeezing balls, or strengthening my upper body. My legs won't stand. Lots of work—and pain!

My physical therapist, Theo, is working my ass off. "I'm fucking tired!"

No response.

"Where's my wife? Where is Katherine? Does she know you guys are overworking me?"

Theo looks at me strangely. "Maybe we should stop," he says, coming over to check my vitals. Everything is fine with my numbers. "You messing with me, kid?"

Seeing myself in the mirror is a shock. I'm a kid, not the man I really am. I feel paranoia, anxiety, fear, and doubt. Along with mental and physical pain.

"Can you help me?" I ask. "What did they do with my body?"

He looks at me questioningly. He thinks that I am either fucking with him or insane. Theo doesn't answer. Well trained, I think.

"What did they do with my fucking body? With my family!"

Other patients and staff in the room look at me.

"This is fucking bullshit. Why are they using me as an experiment?" I am in a full meltdown. I cannot stop and will not stop. "What is this place? Why are you fucking doing this to me!"

Theo is drowning in my questions. "This is a hospital." He picks up my folder. "You had a fall."

"That's fucking bullshit. That was my brother, Brick." Theo gets my wheelchair. "Fuck you! Fuck you all! I know what you are doing!" I add.

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The therapist comes to work with me twice a day. My afternoon session doesn't go any better. I become enraged, asking for Katherine. "Get my wife!" This time, the therapist laughs. "Wife? What are you, twelve?"

I become belligerent. "Fuck you! You are a fucking dork. You ugly motherfucker! How did they do this? How? Where are my kids?"

I stop doing therapy. I have completely lost my mind.

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Dad has gone back to work. He visits as soon as he gets off each day. He comes in with a piece of pie as a treat, like I am a kid. This guy is not my dad. How could he be? I was with my dad when he passed away. He was an older man. This guy is a pod. A fucking alien!

"Jack, they tell me you had some difficulty in physical therapy today," he says.

I do not answer him. I'm not going to. He starts organizing things in the room, takes the pie out of the box, places it on my tray. "Jack, these people are trying to help you."

"Where is Katherine?"

He shakes his head. "Not this again."

"Yes, this again. Where is my family?"

"You are thirteen," Dad yells. "You fell through the floor in an abandoned boarding house; which, by the way, I told you to stay out of. And fractured your skull."

"That was Brick!"

My father, this pod, is clearly upset. "No, Jack, I'm afraid not. It was you! And you know how I know that? Because I sat here day after day, night after night, praying you wouldn't die."

His voice breaks. Nurses gather in the room to see what all the commotion is about. "Mind your fucking business!" I yell at them.

Dad turns and glares at me. "Watch your mouth."

I pick up the pie and drop it to the floor like a two-year-old. Even I am not me.

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Dr. Klein and the therapist discourage me from talking about Katherine and my kids, which I do incessantly. They don't know what to do with me. I am making everything difficult and everyone uncomfortable. I'm insane! I fell through the floor, fracturing my skull. Then I was unconscious for almost a month. Now that I am awake, I've gone off the deep end thinking I have a wife and kids. Dr. Klein brings in other doctors; one of those doctors tells my dad that profound confusion is not unusual. They talk like I'm not in the room while holding a medicine ball between my legs.

"I'm not deaf, jerk off!" I yell. "I'm just profoundly confused."

The physical therapist fights a laugh. My dad, this pod—whatever the fuck he is—is mortified. He has been telling stories to the staff about what a good little Catholic boy I am. Now that I am awake, all those stories seem like balls-ass lies. I am contradicting them with my fucking mouth. I'm more like a drunk sailor on a Saturday night.

Before my dad has a chance to reprimand me, Dr. Klein shakes his head in a "let it go" manner. "Mr. Kelly, you will see a lot of agitation, combativeness, and other unusual behavior—like the talk about the wife and kids—but it will go away, or lessen at the very least." They think I'm angry because of all the therapy. It's because I'm so sad.

He wants me to see a psychiatrist. He says it will help clear the cobwebs. I know it's because I won't let go of my family. Some days, I can't get out of bed. Dad and I fight a lot. It is like I was in some horrible car accident and survived, but my wife and kids were killed. I have survivor's guilt.

When I am alone, I cry a lot. Memories of Katherine, my kids. Playing games, teaching them tic-tac-toe. Taking the kids to Disneyland. It just can't be. It makes me ache. I cry so hard I vomit.

A psychiatrist has been brought in to work on my head. Dr. Melvin is a nice man. He sits with me and my dad a couple of days a week. They think the fall has altered my personality, with all my cursing and this "family" I've lost. They are afraid I am in full depression, worried it will affect my recovery. Dr. Melvin asks me how a thirteen-year-old boy can have children.

"Don't be so condescending," I say to him, which my father doesn't like.

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He starts giving me shit about it, but Dr. Melvin tells him it's all right. That it's very important for me to express myself. I like that. He listens to me give their birthdays, their hobbies. He occasionally writes things down. We aren't getting anywhere with my head.

Physical therapy is a must; they have convinced me of that. It is very difficult and painful. Swearing is the only way I get through it. I mean, I fucking swear! Sounds ridiculous. But I can't—won't—forget that life.

Finally, I begin making big progress with physical therapy. They have me swimming twice a week in a private gym. Physically I am getting stronger.

Aunt Paula and Uncle Willy visit me in the hospital and bring me candy and a comic book to read. Aunt Paula is the only one who seems interested in my “wife and kids.” Dad makes sure she knows it is a taboo subject.

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We go home to our railroad flat, located in a pre-war five-story walk-up. When I say pre-war, I'm talking about World War I. I'm glad we are on the second floor because dad will not carry me, even though he could. One day, I crawl up the stairs crying, just to show him how difficult it is, and he lets me. Our apartment is so much smaller than my home in California. Dad has set the apartment up so I'm always working. He has a long rope, the kind you use to tie a boat to a dock. It goes straight down the apartment from the kitchen radiator to the living room radiator. My father wants me to use the rope to get around the apartment instead of relying on crutches or a walker.

They told us immediately after the incident that I would never walk again, that I would be wheelchair-bound. Dad said ‘no’ and then made me say ‘no.’ He has signs all over our apartment: “I will walk on my own.” “Anything is possible with God.” Now he is giving me dates—goals—as to when I should be able to reach each step. I keep on cursing! Fuck, I went from the nice kid who would barely say dammit to motherfucker this, fuck that. Dad said you can say whatever you want as long as you complete the task. He always sings this stupid song, “High Hopes.” I hate it. I'd like to stomp all over that motherfucking ant!

Getting up in the middle of the night to pee is daunting. “Help me! Help me, Dad!” I yell.

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I don't want to get out of bed, but he won't come. I hang onto the rope, trying not to fall or piss myself, and I keep yelling for help. His idea of helping is to coach me.

"You got this, Jack! Don't give in! Call on the Holy Spirit! Find your power!"

One night I have the rope under my arms swinging back and forth. I began to cry and piss myself at the same time.

"I hate you! I hate you! This is child abuse!" I yell.

He returns with a change of underwear and pajamas. "I'll leave them in the bathroom for you."

I drop to the floor and lay there crying. Feeling as sorry for myself as anyone could ever be. "I should have died when I fell. I wish I would have."

"Yeah, well, God had other plans for you," he says as he goes back to bed.

I lay in my urine-stained clothes all night. In the morning he picks me up off the floor and helps me shower. "Is this what you want—someone to help you shower the rest of your life?" he asks later, as I eat my breakfast. He starts taking down the rope and signs. He carries me downstairs under my protest. That night, I ask him to put the rope and signs back up.

I fight to make it into the bathroom every day like I am slaying a dragon. Nothing will stop me from getting on my feet again.