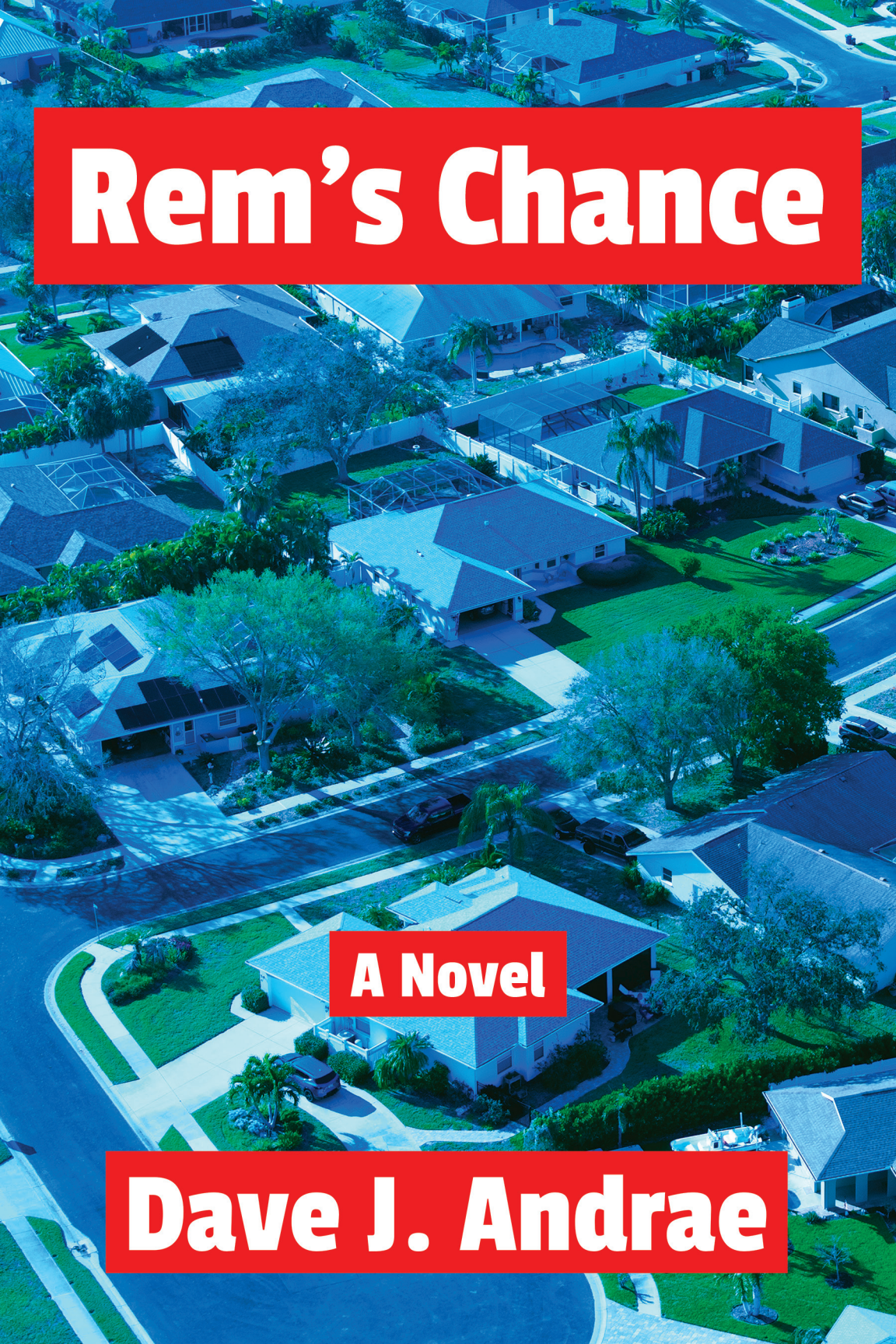

Rem's Chance
A Novel
Dave J. Andrae

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Dave J. Andrae



KAJI-PUP PRESS
Southwest Florida



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For all of the stellar musicians
whose work kept me company
while this was being written
(from October 25, 2021
through March 4, 2024).

ALSO BY DAVE J. ANDRAE

The Friends of Allan Renner

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Rem's Chance

Chapter One

They left Fort Myers at half past midnight, saying little to each other once they got in the car. Heading northbound at a steady clip, Gene noticed few other vehicles on the road. Almost everything beyond the range of the headlights was rendered dull, enveloped in a pale yellow tinge. The stars above barely registered as such. Instead, it was the blackness of night, more than anything else, that held court as they continued moving through it.

Gene would be working from home the next day but wouldn't need to be dressed until ten o'clock; after enjoying his yoga pants and bare feet for most of the evening, putting on jeans and socks and lacing up his shoes tonight had felt like an imposition. Lacing up shoes under *any* circumstances was starting to become a hassle, he had noticed, now that he was in his mid-forties. There was the strain in his knees, the sense that he was becoming less flexible with time (he didn't practice yoga, just liked the pants). And then there was the sense that much of what he aspired to do, still, could be taken care of in informal attire, unless he was meeting with clients, or Nadine was involved and she was too dolled up to be flanked by a man in Velcro strap sandals. Driving more than about thirty miles from home would also be motivation enough for Gene to forgo his preferred footwear for proper shoes with more support, but he was seldom jazzed about it.

"Should I put something on?" Nadine asked, breaking the silence when they were halfway there, gesturing to the car stereo between them. Being a newer car with some contemporary tweaks, its dials and indicators were lit up in a medley of LEDs—turquoise, red, and pink. These gave the interior a futuristic feel, one that wouldn't have seemed out of place in a vehicle with vertical takeoff capabilities.

"No, I need it quiet for now," Gene said. "Not feeling too festive. This isn't my idea of a stellar night out."

"You must think it's mine since you've brought me along," Nadine said with a risible air.

He could feel her pulling him out of his funk, ever so slightly.

"Well, you know, it's . . . it's easier if you're here."

A car passed them in the right lane.

"For starters," he continued, "having a white dame in the car makes an Arab look less suspicious."

"Does it now?"

"Besides, I get bored with longer drives . . . especially at night." As he said this he let out a yawn. "I need company just to stay present. Staring forward, when it's just me, I almost forget where I am, like I'm watching somebody else's hands on the wheel, as if it's not me that's driving. Whatever I am starts to leak out the top of my skull and some other something takes over. I could drift off, lose consciousness. Then, the next thing you know, this thing's folded up in a ravine, with my bulbous head hanging out the window getting gnawed on by a gator."

Nadine chortled.

"It's not a pleasant picture," Gene added. "At least not for me. For the gator, who knows? Could be the best night of his life, a foray into the world of Polish Middle Eastern cuisine. He might invite his friends over, hold an impromptu banquet."

"You've always got potential worst-case scenarios on tap. Ever notice that?"

"No, I have not in fact noticed that."

"It's true," Nadine said, smirking. Though thirty-nine, with her barretted bob and pink pullover, she might have been mistaken for a brunette in her late twenties. "You dole them out all the time," she said. "Without even knowing it. You've got one for virtually any subject, any occasion."

Gene tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and cleared his throat. He wasn't eager to concede the point. After a minute of silence, he said, "It could happen. Part of me thinks the moment I cease entertaining these scenarios, the more likely they are to crop

up. Ever think about *that*, missy?"

"*Missy*? That's mis-*sus* to you. Or soon-to-be missus, I guess."

At that point Gene had failed to notice the white van that had just begun tailing them.

"Anyway, real talk, since we're on the topic of worst-case scenarios: I hope this doesn't turn out to be one," Nadine said. "I hope everything's alright."

"You mean this business with my dad?" He looked to his right and she nodded. "Ah, the more I've thought about it since we left, it's probably nothing. I know I let it rattle me at first, in the heat of the moment, but it's gotta be nothing."

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't get a sinking feeling; there was no 'disturbance in The Force' before we got the call to drive up there and give them the key. If I'd felt something was amiss before that, I would've given them the go-ahead to bust the front door open right away. But everything was fine until we got the call. If I became agitated then, that's because we were enjoying our Monday night, its lack of obligations; all of a sudden there was an errand to run, and it got my mind spinning."

"So it's really nothing?"

"Honestly, he's probably just grown too lazy to collect the mail. Or answer the phone. He gets like that sometimes, indifferent to outside demands. Or maybe he left abruptly to go gamble somewhere. If so, he'll be back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Sometimes he barely gives a flying fuck about *anything*," Gene said. "If I had to break it down, I'd say . . . I'd say my dad likes his dog Bonnie. He fancies cigars and card games. He likes crisp one hundred dollar bills and kielbasa. Most things beyond that . . . and maybe watching TV . . . represent some kind of nuisance, a threat that could drive a wedge between him and his happiness. I'm surprised he RSVP'd us about the wedding. He's that aloof."

"So that's where you get it," Nadine said.

"What are you talking about? Hey, I can deal, babe. I'm *in the world*, making the wheel go 'round. Don't go painting us with

the same brush just 'cause we're related. My dad and I are different people. Way different."

"You don't have to get fired up, hon. No need to orate now; it's just me here. I was only teasing."

"Fair enough."

Gene yawned again and looked at the GPS monitor.

"We'll be there in about . . . twenty . . . twenty-five minutes. So sit tight."

They continued up I-75. Almost as soon as it had materialized, the white van behind them was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

There was an argument. It wasn't the first. Sitting at the kitchen table across from Dita, as he bore the brunt of her ire, Rem felt he might die if they lived under the same roof much longer.

The night preceding he'd defied the need for sleep to wrap up his best chapter yet. After waking that day at quarter to five, as if being roused out of a coma, he wasn't too keen on being dubbed a "shiftless fucking do-nothing" only half an hour later. Not before he got his bearings. Not if he wasn't being paid to sit there and take it.

Rem wore a blank expression, watching Dita's nostrils flare as she hurled verbal abuse at him, almost as if to see what would stick. He wondered how much money it would require for him to remain silent and seated while someone—anyone—screamed maledictions into his face. Rem had had his share of odd jobs in the past. People did all kinds of things for money. *What would be the hourly fee a person would charge for that? Or would it be billed in ten-minute blocks? Yeah, that seems more likely,* he thought, trying to appear as if his mind wasn't elsewhere.

Hours later, after the tension had eased, Rem decided he would leave the premises on Cantoria Drive. He felt it in his bones,

the urge to go outside and put some literal distance between himself and Dita, which would no doubt match the emotional distance, though nowhere near to scale; he wouldn't leave the neighborhood. But a few blocks north, away from her aura for the rest of night, would suffice.

While they'd been in love, Dita had the power to lift his spirits, effortlessly, by virtue of her mere presence. With her wavy golden hair, delicate features, and pleasing voice (when she wasn't mad at him), she'd cut quite a figure. It didn't hurt that she also possessed a bottomless well of pop culture savvy; she was a bit of a raconteur.

But after she soured on Rem, the opposite had become the case. She'd collected a mental catalog of his faults, which had revealed themselves over time, bit by bit. If he fell out of line and she was in the mood to pounce, she was all too eager to count the ways in which he was, in her estimation, "worthless." Since Rem had woken up late that afternoon and failed to answer the real estate agent's email during office hours, such an instance had presented itself.

This wasn't going to be the first time he would take refuge in his Ford 500 Limited. At this juncture, at least, he had a sense of where he would go in the morning. When the ascending sun woke him up, Rem would let out a yawn and simply return home. There, he would do his daily duties and eat breakfast, all while avoiding eye contact with Dita, despite them being in close quarters. After that, they would steel themselves enough to resume hashing out the matter at hand: selling off the bungalow they'd bought together before all of the affection, goodwill, and aspirations they'd shared eroded into nothing, like the shoreline of an islet perched scarcely above sea level.

That was in the fall of 2019, when they'd pooled their resources, gotten a little help from their folks, and bought the place. They'd wanted to up the ante, as new lovers afraid of playing it safe and becoming predictable to each other are wont to do.

Two years ago now, he thought, slamming the door of his car in the driveway. It was black, but not so black as to conceal that it was in need of a wash. "The fuck was I thinking," he muttered under

his breath. He noticed the dark circles under his eyes in the rearview mirror, apparent even in the forgiving glow of the orange streetlight positioned on the edge of their soon-to-be-former property.

Rem was forty-six. People his age, or thereabouts, were bound to show signs of wear sooner or later. Trying not to think about how no one would mistake him for a young man again, he started the engine.

As he headed north along Janus—*such a barren street*, he thought, *especially at night*—Rem settled on turning left onto Ortega Drive. The cannabinoid sleep aid he'd taken over half an hour ago would soon kick in.

In that part of southwest Florida, the subset of neighborhoods had been christened Palmera Cay in the mid-eighties. Palmera Cay was insulated from the main thoroughfare just to the east by tall patches of densely entangled greenery, interrupted only by adjoining streets at its northern and southernmost ends. Several miles west, roughly parallel to the thoroughfare, the Gulf Coast could be found; the closer one got to the water, generally, the more expensive the real estate became. Ortega Drive had a reputation for being the quietest stretch of Palmera Cay that had houses on either side. Its atmosphere was sleepy to the point that during Halloween trick-or-treaters would skip it altogether, figuring that past sundown everyone on the block would be zoning out in front of their televisions if not down for the count.

Rem parked the car in a patch of darkness between two streetlights on the southern end of the street, a few of houses in. Taking the keys from the ignition and jamming them into his pocket, he shimmied over to the passenger seat and let out a sigh. *She's always had a catty streak*, he thought, *ever since we first met*. That he could be on the receiving end of her barbs, or worse, fall out of favor with her, hadn't occurred to him then.

Rem closed his eyes for a second and it came back, the image of Dita when they first crossed paths. Her hair and its highlights, the tight black top she wore that exposed her shoulders, the crafty look on her face as he stood behind her and her friend Janet waiting to buy a ticket at the movie house. He couldn't remember what it was

exactly, some sort of witty, faintly unkind comment about a celebrity that he, too, was tired of hearing about. Whatever it was, he giggled a little too loudly; she turned around, and after he said, "I feel the same way, actually," defusing the awkwardness, it was enough of an ice breaker for a spark to fly between them. Her disarming visage and the smell of cotton candy and popcorn mingling in his nose, compounded with his vague hunger—even though he'd just eaten—galvanized the ease with which they would soon get to know each other.

The impetus didn't amount to much more than that. It had mostly been instinct on his part. His actions had been colored by the sense that if he thought too hard about any of it, it would all evaporate. Rem knew it would've been easy to foist a series of judgments on top of the very stuff of life itself, as he had so often done in the past, sometimes regrettably. To be "someone else," to be less uptight, even for a moment, seemed to be what the situation—perhaps all social situations—called for.

"You *fuckin' idiot*," he blurted out, loud enough that someone nearby might have heard him had the windows been open. While admonishing himself he pressed the lever to recline the passenger seat to a more recumbent position.

To Rem, thinking back for a second on the early part of this drawn-out chapter, it didn't feel then like he was squandering the last vestiges of what might have been his "best years." It didn't seem as if he was stepping on the wrong path. But now, in the throes of whatever *this* was, it gave him a sinking feeling to retrace the rationale—more like a set of whims in hindsight—that had compelled him to head in this direction. He'd let his guard down and assumed one hand would wash the other, with everything humming along swimmingly in perpetuity.

Those warm and fuzzy feelings between them then, the euphoria of two people who moved through life as if daily reinventing the world, seemed so distant now. It was as if all of that had belonged to someone else's past, a personal history less jagged than his. It seemed a recurring theme, that just as soon as he started to feel settled and content, stretching his legs out to fully enjoy himself,

something would come along and upend his peace of mind.

In this case that something had largely been the pandemic, which was still ongoing. First it had made Dita and him postpone their late spring wedding in 2020, and then, after more personal and economic strain than either of them could have anticipated, it impelled them to call the whole thing off. Then instead of adjusting to *that*—settling on at least being able to tolerate coexisting—tensions had become pronounced enough that the only way forward was for them to dissolve the corporation and part ways.

Somewhere in the midst of this belabored series of events, Rem turned inward and had taken it upon himself to begin writing his first novel. As the trajectory of his relationship with Dita spiraled downward, the sense that he had what it took to be an author grew stronger and stronger. He'd found this curious but kept it to himself, lest someone accuse him of nursing a logical fallacy.

Now, nestled in his car, Rem just stared into space for a while, tracing the dirt-caked contours of the top of his windshield, rendered dimly visible by the streetlight twenty paces away. As he sat in a suspended state and the edible's effects started kicking in, his armpits and crotch began to feel clammy. Or maybe they had been this way for a while but he'd been too distracted to notice.

Rem eyed his watch. It was ten minutes to one, October 26. The temperature outside was a merciful 75 degrees. He pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and thought for a moment about turning it on, before realizing nothing he would come into contact with would ease his troubled mind; more likely, the opposite would be the case. At that hour, in his state, there didn't seem to be much of an upside to consulting the world beyond his surroundings, as unremarkable as they might have seemed. Instead, Rem just had to sit with his feelings a bit, soak up the discomfort, as he gradually grew numb.

He exhaled, trying not to think of anything at all, and he soon set to dreaming.

* * *

Officer Emmitt Graves couldn't ignore the soreness in his right arm and shoulder. It felt as if his arm had been yanked somehow but hadn't settled back into place. Sitting there in the driver's seat of the parked squad car, it flashed through his mind again, a cartoon image of the muscle fibers in and around his rotator cuff pulsating red. To curb the discomfort, he popped an over-the-counter pain reliever in his mouth, attempting to swallow it "like a man," in one smooth gesture without the aid of a liquid. He was unable to do this and gagged for a second before it went down. He regretted not having waited for Officer Placko to emerge from the Circle K with his Powerade and their coffees.

No one but the two policemen and the store's clerk appeared to be lurking about. Along with the unbecoming fluorescent lighting, this underscored the impression that this roadside stop wasn't suited for congregating.

At a modest volume, Officer Graves could hear the police radio. A 10-56 downtown, an 11-82 several miles south. Not much else. This was a Monday night going into a Tuesday that didn't fall on a holiday or coincide with a major sporting event. Game One of the World Series wouldn't be underway until a few hours before the next night's shift, and neither team hailed from Florida. In a mid-sized city not known for its late-night diversions, the dearth of activity came as no surprise. Part of working late, many nights, was learning to deal with rarely having much to do. Sometimes after fruitless patroling, the cops would make random traffic stops just to see if anything unusual was afoot. There rarely was.

Officer Graves looked at the laptop firmly mounted between the two front seats. He re-read the address and directions. The location wasn't far up the road. Just a few miles south, then a right, and another two turns. "Two-oh-six Ortega Drive," he said. "Two-oh-six . . . Ortega Drive," he said again, this time nodding at Officer Placko, seventeen years his junior, who had now exited the

convenience mart with their beverages.

Officer Jake Placko had been assigned to partner up with Officer Graves to get a taste of what it would be like working the graveyard shift, which he would eventually do alone. In his limited dealings with him, Officer Graves had noticed that Officer Placko could be overeager, one of those cops who'd throw his weight around at times to compensate for his fear of being ineffectual. To someone who fancied himself a man of action, the most difficult thing was possessing a skillset and not being able to put it into play. Officer Graves thought the twenty-eight-year-old cop lacked a realistic understanding of just how much drudgery and tedium lay before him. Being relatively young, he wasn't wise to the long game, the value of being slow but steady in the downtime, and erring on the side of caution even when things *did* ramp up. Officer Graves, however, had internalized all of this. He had the restraint needed to avoid mucking things up when it didn't serve his or anyone else's interests. In addition to helping him on the job, this was a factor that had enabled him to stay married for so long, as well as tolerate his idiot children.

Climbing into the car and handing over the drinks, Officer Placko closed the passenger-side door. He then peeked at the monitor. "That's where we're headed, huh?"

"Yup," Officer Graves said, without making eye contact. "Dispatch says the son should be there in a few minutes." He took the lid off his coffee, blew on it for a moment before putting it back in place. "Have you done many wellness checks?" he asked.

"A couple here and there. They weren't eventful," Officer Placko said. He seemed to regret not having chanced upon the sort of calamities that would've been fodder for anecdotes.

"Sometimes there won't be an active situation, where a subject has to be neutralized or subdued, talked out of doing something rash, or brought into custody. If there's danger somewhere in the equation, the person might be missing, or sometimes . . . sometimes he's already dead." A plaintive tone cut through as Officer Graves said this. He then rubbed his mustache.

"Do they think the guy's deceased or what?"

"They don't know. No one's gotten to the bottom of it yet. But his mailbox is full; he doesn't answer his phone; none of the neighbors have seen him let his dog out in a few days, but they can hear it barking inside. Doesn't sound promising. But he could just be AWOL. Or maybe he's fallen and he can't get up. It happens."

"What's his name? Maybe I know 'im from somewhere around town."

"He's a retired widower. Septuagenarian. Probably not one of your local drinking buddies," Officer Graves said. "Name's Andrzej Pawlus." He then started the squad car's engine.

* * *

At first, everything was hazy. He didn't know where he was. Slowly, with some strain, he opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on the ground of an indoor structure, what appeared to be a large warehouse or maybe an aircraft hangar. Fixtures above, hanging from the rafters of the arched metal roof, illuminated the scene. There before him, in all directions, were piles of papers and assorted objects, some of them standing as high as eight or nine feet off the ground. A din was coming from somewhere outside the structure, but he couldn't discern what was causing it. He looked over his gaunt body and noticed he was wearing a hospital gown, nothing more. With some stiffness, he sat up and then ran his left hand through his hair.

Standing now, he began inspecting the piles of items, a mixture of valuables, ephemera, and trash. It looked like the preliminary inventory in the wake of a disaster, to be sorted more carefully at a later point.

Some of the stacks consisted of children's toys: a Big Wheel here, a small bicycle there; video games and badminton gear; many stuffed animals and plastic action figures. He thought he recognized some of it.

Other piles were of name-brand foods, some of which had been phased out or boasted designs that had been updated decades ago. Around them were full course meals inexplicably stacked high, in varying stages of edibility, and mounds of dry cereal mixed in with ice cream treats melting fast.

There were some photo albums nearby with outdated brown covers, gold lettering denoting their function. He opened one and for a moment thought he spotted images of himself with his family from many years ago, but in his state he couldn't be sure if it was them or some other family that resembled them.

Among the stacks of papers, he noticed illustrations, some of them bordering on inscrutable, probably drawn by a child or children. There were vintage eighties Trapper Keepers and piles of completed homework marked up by a red pen. He ripped one of the pages from a math assignment at the top and looked at the name in the upper-right-hand corner. It read: "Remy Bruxvoort – 4th Grade." He'd received a B-.

"Whatever you're able to fit in one suitcase is what you can take with you," a voice behind him said. It was a woman's voice.

Rem turned around and saw that it was his high school science teacher, Ms. Strachota. She was a squat fleshy woman with curly blond hair with whom he couldn't remember having many personal exchanges; he hadn't thought of her in at least twenty years. Rem's memory of being in her class was that he'd been more preoccupied with drafting his band's flyers and song lyrics than retaining the principles of introductory physics.

Ms. Strachota gestured to a jumble of suitcases by her side. Rem walked over and grabbed one, then resumed rooting around the miscellaneous stacks of things, not questioning why he was doing this, or where exactly he would be going once he'd collected what he presumed he needed.

A life in fragments, he thought, his eyes darting from one mound to another. *The usual hodgepodge of cultural clutter. Literal piles of it. And what of it?*

Sifting through more papers, Rem found some old rock show flyers. They were made in a D.I.Y. fashion, with amateur drawings

and photocopied magazine clippings collaged together. Some pertained to shows played by his erstwhile punk band The Bubbling Samovars, the mere recollection of which still gave Rem weirdly pleasant feelings. Stripped of context, to a stranger who wasn't there at the time, he wasn't sure the band could be done justice in the harsh light of 2021. *But The Bubbling Samovars, aye, that was my best band, I can see that now,* he found himself thinking. *Maybe someday, somehow, the world will notice.*

Rem placed the flyers, about a dozen and a half of them, in his suitcase. They were the first things he encountered among the miscellaneous objects that didn't have a link to his past that was nebulous at best. *Finally*, he thought, *something germane to what I'm about, maybe even something cool.*

Soon after adding them to his effects, he noticed the lights above dimming rapidly, the inside of the entire structure now bathed in alternating red and blue light. The din outside was growing louder and currents of air were picking up among the stacks of things, causing some of the papers to flap about.

Rem could hear a dog barking in the distance, and then a voice said, "Look at this loser, playing with his past again." It was Dita, he was almost sure of it, but he couldn't pinpoint where she was, how she was able to see him. For a moment, Rem wondered if her voice was simply inside his own head, but then she let out a belittling laugh that echoed from one wall to the other, its repetitions swelling.

The din outside was becoming thunderous now, the dog barks continued, and some blunt repetitive noises, as if a rug was being beaten over a balcony, punctuated the scene. Rem noticed Ms. Strachota was nowhere in sight. The commotion was mounting and making him feel uneasy.

The red and blue lights started alternating at a quickening rate, as they grew bright enough to feel blinding in their intensity. The dog barks were now getting louder and the voice he thought belonged to Dita cackled in a demented register. A high-pitched sinewave then filled the air, nauseating Rem at once, becoming so bothersome he dropped his suitcase to the ground and plugged his

ears with his index fingers. He felt as if his eardrums were about to burst before letting out a ghastly scream; his legs gave out from under him as he fell backwards; the hard ground beneath him cracked the back of his head. Rem was seized by the image of the crack in his skull opening up into a gaping hole, as his brains oozed out like excrement. A dozen rats converged on the scene, feasting on his still-warm corpse with abandon.

It was then that Rem woke with a start, jerking forward for a moment as if he'd been resuscitated. He was sweating and a flashlight was trained on his face. Through squinted eyes he could make out a policeman with an unflattering countenance—a crew cut, large protruding ears that curved inwards on the edges, and an authoritarian scowl like that of a drill sergeant whose hemorrhoids were acting up. The cop, his mouth just about watering, was aggressively tapping his nightstick against the pane of glass on the passenger-side door of the Ford 500 Limited, as if threatening to break it. Behind him, the emergency lights of a cop car were illuminating the eastern half of Ortega Drive, though no siren was sounding off. Briefly, Rem noticed that a few people were gathered near the entrance of the bungalow across the street, a dog in tow, as a van of some sort finished parking in the otherwise unoccupied driveway.

"Get outta the car!" Officer Placko shouted.

Rem muttered something barely audible, still groggy and under the influence of the cannabinoid he'd taken, not yet in full possession of his faculties. He didn't know what to think of the situation.

"Get outta the fuckin' car! Now! *Keep your hands up,* where I can see 'em."

"Okay, okay," Rem said. "Geeze. Just . . . hold on." Thinking he had no choice but to acquiesce, he disengaged the power door locks of the sedan. The passenger seat was still reclined, which made climbing out of the car after he managed to get the door open look silly, as if Rem was a street mime pretending to be three sheets to the wind.

Not more than a second after Rem was on his feet, Officer Placko screamed for him to turn around and place the palms of his

hands on the top of the car. Rem obliged and was rigorously frisked.

After not finding anything on Rem but his wallet and phone, which he removed, Officer Placko ordered him to put his hands behind his lower back. Rem did so and soon felt a handcuff clasp too tightly over the wrist of his right hand, before the other handcuff clasped over his left wrist.

"Turn around!"

Rem did as he was told.

Officer Placko opened Rem's wallet and removed his ID, shining his flashlight on it for a few seconds. "What are you doin' here?" he asked, his tone sharp, as if he wasn't interested in hearing anything that wasn't incriminating.

"I live just up the street. I was—"

"Are you *on somethin*? Don't fuckin' bullshit me, now. You're *high*, aren't you? Doin' a little coke? Some X? Some angel dust maybe?"

"No. No. God no. I just took a sleep-aid, is all."

"A what?"

"A CBN gummy, to help me nod off. There's THC in them, but they're legal. I got mine through the mail." It was at this moment that Rem got a better look at what was going on across the street; up to then he'd been too jostled around to get a bead on it.

He saw two men in utilitarian clothes carrying a stretcher from the back of the van parked in the driveway, heading into the house.

Not far from the foot of the steps, two people, a man and a woman, were huddled together, talking in an animated fashion with an older woman, probably in her late sixties or seventies, who wore an expression of incredulity and nodded every so often.

The man, who was holding the end of the leash attached to what looked like a Sheltie, had a thick but closely cropped beard and wore glasses of a dignified nature. He looked a little pudgy, Rem thought, and was possibly Italian, maybe Greek, or Middle Eastern. He appeared to be in his forties; his hairline was receding, but he'd wisely chosen to keep things short on top. The man looked familiar somehow, but Rem couldn't place where he might have seen

him before. Every now and again the Sheltie would let out a bark, seemingly at no one in particular. The woman beside the man was a brunette with fair skin who looked well put together, still youthful. She wore an expression of concern. *They must be married*, Rem thought. Occasionally, while talking to the older woman, one of them would peek over in his direction, likely wondering what was going on between him and Officer Placko, though Rem figured it had to be small potatoes compared to whatever had transpired inside the house.

"Hello. Over here. Stay with me now," Officer Placko said, butting into Rem's train of thought. He prodded Rem in the abdomen with his nightstick.

"What happened over there?" Rem said.

"That? That's on a need-to-know basis."

"Someone must have died."

"How would you know that?"

"Because why else would there be people over there at this hour, with police lights on and a stretcher being carried in? If it were something else, the cops wouldn't be here, right?"

"I'm the one askin' the questions here. I talk, you listen."

"Was it a natural death or a murder?"

"We don't know," Officer Placko said. Then he seemed to wish he hadn't admitted this.

"Oh, okay. Let me see if I understand this now. You think that in the event there *was* a murder over there, whoever did it got real sleepy afterwards and hit the hay in a car parked across the street, instead of traveling two blocks south to his own home or, I don't know, fleeing the state entirely. A killer with acute narcolepsy, yeah? *That's* who you think I am? That's who done it?" Rem looked indignant.

"Well, I tend not to believe in coincidences," Officer Placko said with a smile, a sly but sheepish tone of voice overtaking the authoritarian quality of his questioning up to that point.

"Another cop with nothing better to do, clutching at straws, trying to pull a collar out of thin air."

"You know what they say, where there's smoke, there's—"

"Jake!" Officer Graves called out. He was standing just outside the door to the house, looking down from the top of the steps before he made his way down them.

"You stay right there," Officer Placko said to Rem, waving the nightstick in his direction. Given that Rem was sleep-deprived and had been handcuffed behind his back, he thought the chances he was a flight risk were nil, but he kept this to himself.

Officer Placko turned to Officer Graves, who was approaching, keys rustling, and about to say something before he got a better look at Rem and asked, "Ah . . . what's going on here?"

"This individual—shucks, I forgot his name already."

"Rem Bruxvoort. Or Remy sometimes."

"Right. This *Rem* here, Mr. Brooksfort—if that even is his real name—was found sleepin' right here, not that many feet from where we found the body. I thought he might be a person of interest. He's been pretty mouthy so far, talkin' back a lot, which leads me to believe he's hidin' somethin'."

As this exchange was unfolding, Gene perked up his ears. He and Nadine had been listening to Carol Van Zandt, his father's next-door neighbor. She was the one who first voiced concern that something might have been wrong, phoning the local police department to look into the matter.

Before that night, Gene had only exchanged pleasantries with Carol once or twice, in his sparse trips up there. She had learned he was Andrzej Pawlus's son (though they didn't resemble each other much) and lived about sixty miles south. Carol told the police to look Gene up, to see if he had a key to his father's house. This turned out to be the case, as he had once looked after Bonnie and been given a spare that he never got around to returning.

After everyone was on the same page, the key was retrieved from Gene, and the house was opened up. Sure enough, Andrzej Pawlus was found dead, slumped over the desk in his office above the garage. Bonnie was downstairs, restless and in need of being tended to. Among those present when the body was discovered, it seemed that Carol was more shocked than anyone.

"You just never know when you'll lose someone," Carol said

in a soft tone of voice as the three of them stood near the front of the house with the dog. "You get used to seeing a person around. It could be your mail lady, someone in your church, or a neighbor. And then one day . . . poof. They're gone. Just like that." She yawned and then said, "It does make you appreciate life, how fleeting it is."

Gene nodded politely. These were sentiments he'd heard so many times before, in different contexts, that even though they applied well to the situation at hand, they failed to carry the intended heft.

Nadine then asked Carol something and Gene heard the words "Rem Bruxvoort" uttered across the street.

What? Gene thought. *Did someone just say . . . ?*

He looked over to where the two policemen were standing. The man they were questioning looked curious. Gene excused himself from the conversation under the pretense of letting Bonnie take another leak, walking her over to the rectangle of grass near the mailbox. He looked out the corner of his eye at what was going on several feet away, near the Ford parked across the street.

"For now," Officer Graves said, "natural causes appear to be the culprit. That's what the examiner says. Probably heart failure. He thinks it happened at least a few days ago." He then looked over at Officer Placko, who returned his glance, and then he gestured to Rem. "So, ah, you can uncuff this guy, send him on his way." Officer Graves let out a cough and then scratched his mostly-bald head. "But write down his plates and license number, and double check everything; we'll file a report later."

"Alright, will do," Officer Placko said. He then asked Rem to turn around before removing the cuffs from his wrists. "No harm, no foul," the policeman said, before giving Rem his phone back.

Gene looked down at Bonnie peeing on the black metal base of the mailbox.

Officer Graves walked in the direction of the house and stopped for a second, nodding at him. "Hi. Not sure if you overheard me there," he said, "but it's as we suspected: your father likely died of natural causes. That's what the M.E. thinks. There's no reason to suspect foul play here—no signs of struggle or anything being

stolen, no injuries, no unusual substances in the house—so I don't think a toxicology report will be needed."

"Alright," Gene said, "I figured as much."

They talked for a second about funeral arrangements, before Officer Graves patted Gene on the shoulder, gave him his business card, and walked back to the house.

Gene's attention returned to the person across the street with the other cop. As the man said, "It's fine . . . these things happen," the squad car's emergency lights illuminated his face for a flash of a second. Gene could just barely tell that the man had a snaggletooth on the left side of his mouth, on the top row.

"Excuse me," Gene called out, as Rem and Officer Placko turned toward him. "Excuse me, did you say your name was *Rem* earlier?"

"What? Uh . . . yeah, actually. That's my name. Any day of the week. Rem, Remy, or Remington . . . though hardly anyone calls me that." He had a mildly perplexed look on his face.

"And what's your surname?"

"That's kind of a personal question."

Undeterred, Gene said, "Did you go to Garfield High by any chance? Class of ninety-four?"

"What? Uh, yeah. How would you know that?" Now Rem's brow was furrowed. "Wait . . . Who are you?"

"Who am *I*?" Gene walked over to the Rem's car with Bonnie beside him. She started barking. "Who am *I*?" he repeated, as if the question was preposterous.

"Okay, I'll have everything done here in just a second," Officer Placko said, as he finished up writing down a few details in his small notebook, flashlight in hand.

"Don't you recognize me?" Gene said, ignoring the policeman. He then took his glasses off.

"*Sort of*. But I'm not sure I can place you, man. Honestly, I'm really sorry. I've met a bunch of people over the years and after a while everything becomes a little blurred. And I took a sleep aid before he woke me up," Rem said, gesturing to Officer Placko, "so I'm faded."

"Dude, you played in The Bubbling Samovars for *three years*, and you can't even recognize your own bass player?" Gene was getting animated.

Rem's eyes lit up. "Gene? *Eugene Pawlus*. No way. No . . . fucking . . . way," he said. "You've got to be kidding me."

"In the flesh. Fancy seeing *you* here."

After handing Rem his wallet back, Officer Placko walked away, his proverbial tail between his legs. He ended up standing near the passenger-side door of the squad car, leaning against it with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"What are you doing in Florida?" Gene said to Rem.

"I live here."

"Me too."

"Is that your house over there?"

"No, I live in Fort Myers. That's my dad's house. Or was, I guess. He just died."

"Aww, man . . . are you serious?"

Gene nodded.

"Damn, sorry to hear that. I remember him well. He used to complain about how loud we were in the basement. You must be crushed."

"It's weird . . . I'm not taking it that badly now, now that I know he's gone. Heading up here, I was panicked at first, but all along, in the back of my mind, I knew this day would come sooner or later; he was seventy-seven, didn't always take great care of himself. Maybe I'm not too fazed because I'm just tired, or because he and I weren't that close by the end. I don't know. It's strange. I'm feeling several things at once, to the point that it's almost as if I feel nothing at all. Mixed in with all of that, somewhere, is a sense of relief, I guess . . . that he didn't have to suffer too much. And I have to tidy up his place, sift through all of his things and get them in order, which is a whole different deal. My sister doesn't even know he's dead yet, so I need to call her first thing in the morning."

Rem remembered Gene's younger sister Julie fondly. She would sit in on some of The Bubbling Samovars' practices and went to a few of their shows.

"This is my dad's dog, by the way," Gene said, gesturing below. "Her name's Bonnie. She was by herself for a while, so I've got to feed her some more, clean the floor before we leave, and give her a bath once we get home."

"Hello, Bonnie," Rem said, kneeling down and patting her on the top of her head, then running his hand through her thick mane. Like many Shelties, the dog had an appealing mixture of hair colors: white, amber, and dark brown. White hair extended from around her entire muzzle to a thin tapering strip between her eyes that ended on her forehead, giving her a regal look; amber hair surrounded her dark, precious eyes. "Good girl," Rem said with a smile. Before things had gone irrevocably south between him and Dita, he'd hoped they would get a dog. "She looks like Lassie."

"I know, right? So yeah . . . long story short, I have some things to sift through. All of this just sort of fell in my lap at short notice. Coursing through my mind were different thoughts at different speeds, and I wasn't even sure how to fit it all together; I've mostly been going with the flow, talking to his neighbor over there and mulling it over. And then *you of all people* showed up—getting hassled by that cop, it looked like—and now it's . . . now it's almost *surreal*. Like, what are even the chances of crossing paths like this?"

"I *know*. It's crazy," Rem said with a grin. Bonnie then let out a playful bark.

At that moment, the white van from earlier was driving south down Bird Street, ominous as ever. It slowed considerably when it reached the intersection of Bird and Ortega Drive, at the west end of the block, before receding from view and speeding up again. Neither Gene, nor Rem, nor anyone else present happened to notice.

"When was the last time we saw each other . . . like, face to face?"

"I don't know. But I probably still had a full head of hair then," Gene said with a chuckle.

"Ha, you did. I think it was at some watering hole in Stallis. Around Christmas. In the late nineties? Early aughts?"

"I think so. *Man*, a lot has happened since then. I've put on a few pounds, as you can tell."

"But you look good," Rem said. "You've still got the glow. You look happy. Me, I've stayed slim, but I'm worse for wear."

It was true that Rem was wiry and had retained a decent head of hair, but overall looked more weathered than his former bandmate. There were the circles under his eyes. But also, there was the pallor of his face, a slight but unmistakable ashen quality that made Rem appear downtrodden, as if the years of strain had taken their toll. Somewhere between the beginning of his thirties and the first few years of his forties, Rem had transitioned from seeming boyish to noticeably aged.

"Don't be so down on yourself," Gene said. "Someone sent me a photo of our class's twenty-year reunion—which I didn't attend—and guess what? Almost no one still looked like a 'young adult.' It's par for the course, man."

"How many people from those days do you keep up with?" Rem asked.

"Not many. I don't fuck with social media except for my job. When people made the jump from Myspace to Facebook, and clogged up the internet with details of their lives, I stayed behind. Didn't really have it in me to get caught up in all of that."

"Probably better off," Rem said. And he knew this as well as anyone, having alienated more than a few people, including former classmates, while posting on social media when he was drunk. "Do you ever talk to Dusty? What's he been up to? Does he still drum?"

"Oh, man, Dusty . . . that's a subject for another time; that crazy fucker." They both laughed. "He seems to be doing well though; travels around a bit, does seasonal work, plays music sometimes, keeps up with a lot of folks. I can fill you in better after I've had a good night's sleep."

Across the street, just then, Andrzej Pawlus's body was being moved down the front steps in a body-bag by the two men, with the aid of their stretcher. Behind them, just beyond the doorway, Officer Graves was speaking with the medical examiner, who was holding a kit of instruments at his side. Gene and Rem looked on, not saying anything for a minute. The two men handling the body then opened the back doors of the van in the driveway and prepared to load it

in. The sound of this, a light clanking of metal against metal, reverberated down the block.

"I'm *getting married soon*," Gene said, turning to Rem, finally breaking the silence.

"Congratulations, man."

"Yeah, that's my fiancée over there." He waved at Nadine, who was still talking to Carol. She glanced over at them but didn't wave back.

"That's fantastic."

"Do you want to meet her?"

"Sure," Rem said. "I'd love to."

The two of them walked over toward the house.

The medical examiner was now leaving. When they bumped into him near the sidewalk, he said he was sorry for Gene's loss. He reminded Gene to call the number on the card he'd given him by the end of the week. As the medical examiner ambled to his car, the van containing the corpse of Andrzej Pawlus backed out of the driveway and then left the block. Officer Graves walked by soon after and exchanged a couple of pleasantries with Gene before heading out. As this was happening, Officer Placko opened the passenger-side door of the squad car, sat down, and shut it. Soon after, he toggled the switch for the red and blue emergency lights into the "off" position.

The sudden absence of colorful light, prosaic as it might have been, was like the unplugging of a Christmas tree; it made the surroundings in that patch of Palmera Cay feel impersonal, as if the handful of people still assembled in front of the bungalow had no reason to be there. Carol saw this as her cue to leave and wished everyone well before returning to her home nextdoor. In less than a minute, the medical examiner left in his car. Then the two policemen left in their squad car, nudging the horn for a fraction of a second on their way north.

Compounded somewhat by the absence of a breeze, everyone remaining felt tired, as if they'd been assailed with weariness by an unknown force.

"Nadine, I'd like you to meet a friend from way back," Gene said, as he and Rem stood closer. "This is Rem Bruxvoort, former

guitarist of The Bubbling Samovars, among other things."

"How do you do?" Nadine said, in a somewhat stiff manner, shaking hands with Rem, but then looking away.

"Fine. Nice to meet you," Rem said with a smile that wasn't returned. "Yeah, we played together for three years, from senior year to just before we were of drinking age. By coincidence I ended up living a couple of blocks away from here. Was just dozing in my car this evening to get some space from my ex-fiancée—who I'm still living with—when that cop woke me up and Gene and I crossed paths . . . which still seems crazy."

"That *is* weird," Nadine said.

"Did Gene ever play our stuff for you?"

"He did, but it was a while back," she said with a sigh.

There were several moments of awkward silence.

"Nadine mostly listens to electronic music and current pop, so our sort of stuff isn't quite her speed," Gene said, in a good-natured tone.

"Oh, that's fine," Rem said. "It was a long time ago anyway; seems like another lifetime now. We were barely more than kids. It makes sense that our music wouldn't be for everyone." He cleared his throat. "So Gene tells me you two are getting married. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Nadine said. "Yeah, we've got a lot to go over before the wedding. It's kind of a pain, with the pandemic and all."

"I bet. You must be excited though."

Nadine nodded in a reluctant way, making fleeting eye contact and then biting one of her fingernails.

"It's amusing that you're 'Gene and Nadine,'" Rem said to both of them. "Sounds like the name of a power couple. Like you're ready to start a fashion line, become socialites, and *dominate the world*." He was making an effort to be affable, but it was falling flat, to the point that Rem came off as forced, not nearly as witty as he'd hoped to be.

Whatever conviviality there might have been that night had now dwindled into a whimper. Rem made his exit, but not before he and Gene eagerly exchanged contact information. The two ex-band-

mates agreed to catch up in more depth in the coming days, once they were rested and more things were in order.

Before locking up his father's home, Gene gave it a cursory cleaning while Nadine gathered Bonnie's food and toys, and threw away a few rotting food items. Even before Andrzej Pawlus had passed away, his living space had probably been in need of being spruced up, Gene thought. A much more thorough cleaning would be in order soon, but in his state, he couldn't confront the task. It was a little after three a.m. when he, Nadine, and Bonnie drove back to Fort Myers, all of them desperately in need of shut-eye.

After Rem had left Ortega Drive and made the short trip home, he sat for a while on the rickety wooden bench on the front porch of the house he and Dita would soon sell. He was overcome by a sense of impermanence.

Rem thought about Gene and Dusty for a bit, the fun they'd all had and the music they'd made. Then his mind seemed to settle on Nadine. Rem's first impression was that he liked her but that she had seemed reserved—overly so, he thought. Rem wasn't sure whether this was because Nadine might have been tired and the situation at hand was trying, or because he just didn't appear to be the sort of person who was worth getting to know off the bat. The circumstances at that moment had no doubt been less than ideal, but Rem had unwittingly been reminded of something he had started to notice more and more as he grew older. He often failed to thrive in liminal spaces, in so far as they involved him dealing with strangers or near-strangers in social situations.

On several occasions, Rem had the sense that, more than anything else, he'd grown to become a walking burden to others, a nuisance, the sort of person who was more likely to be in the way than a welcome foil. His relationship with Dita, before it had deteriorated, stood as proof that this wasn't the case with everyone he didn't share a history with. But once things folded between the two of them it seemed to confirm what he'd suspected all along, that he was someone whose presence was more tolerated than appreciated.

If Rem carried with him a sense of "woe," he wasn't pining for otherness of any sort, but rather longing for relationships with

people who fit like a glove and intuitively enriched one another. There had been an absence of this among most of those he'd gotten to know in more recent times, people moving in and out of his life, almost as if they were just relations of convenience.

Music aside, the key reason Rem still had fond memories of The Bubbling Samovars was that in their three-year existence, the band had been able to maintain just such a rapport. And it wasn't a calculated effort, the sort of thing plotted by adults thirsty for power. Thinking back, Rem couldn't recall many other situations in which he'd been on an equal footing with others and fostered shared dreams and a fruitful symbiosis—at least not for more than a short spell, before things got corrupted somehow or, more likely, just fizzled out.

Rem sighed, still sitting on the wooden bench. Then he got up and entered what was his home for the time being. He gathered a clean change of clothes and hit the shower, to get a jump on the following day, which was sure to be marked by an absence of wonderful vibes.

As the cool water from the shower head cascaded down his back, Rem had a sudden thought: *Whatever happened to those master tapes?* Somehow, in the heat of all that had transpired, it had completely slipped his mind to ask Gene about them. But now, as he was washing off the weight of the preceding hours, feeling pleasantly attuned to the moment, they were all he could think about. Rem's novel-in-progress, which he'd been anxious to resume work on, would have to be set aside, if need be. *But those master tapes . . . Ah! What in the world ever happened to them?*