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Velocity

Dean Koontz

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Extract

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PART ONE
The Choice is Yours

1

With draft beer and a smile, Ned Pearsall raised a toast to his deceased neighbor, Henry Friddle, whose death greatly pleased him.

Henry had been killed by a garden gnome. He had fallen off the roof of his two-story house, onto that cheerful-looking figure. The gnome was made of concrete. Henry wasn't.

A broken neck, a cracked skull: Henry perished on impact.

This death-by-gnome had occurred four years previously. Ned Pearsall still toasted Henry's passing at least once a week.

Now, from a stool near the curve of the polished mahogany bar, an out-of-towner, the only other customer, expressed curiosity at the enduring nature of Ned's animosity.

"How bad a neighbor could the poor guy have been that you're still so juiced about him?"

Ordinarily, Ned might have ignored the question.

He had even less use for tourists than he did for pretzels.

The tavern offered free bowls of pretzels because they were cheap. Ned preferred to sustain his thirst with well-salted peanuts.

To keep Ned tipping, Billy Wiles, tending bar, occasionally gave him a bag of Planters.

Most of the time Ned had to pay for his nuts. This rankled him either because he could not grasp the economic realities of tavern operation or because he enjoyed being rankled, probably the latter.

Although he had a head reminiscent of a squash ball and the heavy rounded shoulders of a sumo wrestler, Ned was an athletic man only if you thought barroom jabber and grudge-holding qualified as sports. In those events, he was an Olympian.

Regarding the late Henry Friddle, Ned could be as talkative with outsiders as with lifelong residents of Vineyard Hills. When, as now, the only other customer was a stranger, Ned found silence even less congenial than conversation with a "foreign devil."

Billy himself had never been much of a talker, never one of those barkeeps who considered the bar a stage. He was a listener.

To the out-of-towner, Ned declared, "Henry Friddle was a pig."

The stranger had hair as black as coal dust with traces of ash at the temples, gray eyes bright with

dry amusement, and a softly resonant voice. "That's a strong word—*pig*."

"You know what the pervert was doing on his roof? He was trying to piss on my dining-room windows."

Wiping the bar, Billy Wiles didn't even glance at the tourist. He'd heard this story so often that he knew all the reactions to it.

"Friddle, the pig, figured the altitude would give his stream more distance," Ned explained.

The stranger said, "What was he—an aeronautical engineer?"

"He was a college professor. He taught contemporary literature."

"Maybe reading that stuff drove him to suicide," the tourist said, which made him more interesting than Billy had first thought.

"No, no," Ned said impatiently. "The fall was accidental."

"Was he drunk?"

"Why would you think he was drunk?" Ned wondered.

The stranger shrugged. "He climbed on a roof to urinate on your windows."

"He was a sick man," Ned explained, plinking one finger against his empty glass to indicate the desire for another round.

Drawing Budweiser from the tap, Billy said, "Henry Friddle was consumed by vengeance."

After silent communion with his brew, the

tourist asked Ned Pearsall, "Vengeance? So you urinated on Friddle's windows first?"

"It wasn't the same thing at all," Ned warned in a rough tone that advised the outsider to avoid being judgmental.

"Ned didn't do it from his roof," Billy said.

"That's right. I walked up to his house, like a man, stood on his lawn, and aimed at his dining-room windows."

"Henry and his wife were having dinner at the time," Billy said.

Before the tourist might express revulsion at the timing of this assault, Ned said, "They were eating quail, for God's sake."

"You showered their windows because they were eating quail?"

Ned sputtered with exasperation. "No, of course not. Do I look insane to you?" He rolled his eyes at Billy.

Billy raised his eyebrows as though to say *What do you expect of a tourist?*

"I'm just trying to convey how pretentious they were," Ned clarified, "always eating quail or snails, or Swiss chard."

"Phony bastards," the tourist said with such a light seasoning of mockery that Ned Pearsall didn't detect it, although Billy did.

"Exactly," Ned confirmed. "Henry Friddle drove a Jaguar, and his wife drove a car—you won't believe this—a car made in *Sweden*."

"Detroit was too common for them," said the tourist.

"Exactly. How much of a snob do you have to be to bring a car all the way from Sweden?"

The tourist said, "I'll wager they were wine connoisseurs."

"Big time! Did you know them or something?"

"I just know the type. They had a lot of books."

"You've got 'em nailed," Ned declared. "They'd sit on the front porch, *sniffing* their wine, reading books."

"Right out in public. Imagine that. But if you didn't pee on their dining-room windows because they were snobs, why *did* you?"

"A thousand reasons," Ned assured him. "The incident of the skunk. The incident of the lawn fertilizer. The dead petunias."

"And the garden gnome," Billy added as he rinsed glasses in the bar sink.

"The garden gnome was the last straw," Ned agreed.

"I can understand being driven to aggressive urination by pink plastic flamingos," said the tourist, "but, frankly, not by a gnome."

Ned scowled, remembering the affront. "Ariadne gave it my face."

"Ariadne who?"

"Henry Friddle's wife. You ever heard a more pretentious name?"

"Well, the Friddle part brings it down to earth."

"She was an art professor at the same college. She sculpted the gnome, created the mold, poured the concrete, painted it herself."

"Having a sculpture modeled after you can be an honor."

The beer foam on Ned's upper lip gave him a rabid appearance as he protested: "It was a *gnome,* pal. A *drunken* gnome. The nose was as red as an apple. It was carrying a beer bottle in each hand."

"And its fly was unzipped," Billy added.

"Thanks *so* much for reminding me," Ned grumbled. "Worse, hanging out of its pants was the head and neck of a dead goose."

"How creative," said the tourist.

"At first I didn't know what the hell *that* meant—"

"Symbolism. Metaphor."

"Yeah, yeah. I figured it out. Everybody who walked past their place saw it, and got a laugh at my expense."

"Wouldn't need to see the gnome for that," said the tourist.

Misunderstanding, Ned agreed: "Right. Just *hearing* about it, people were laughing. So I busted up the gnome with a sledgehammer."

"And they sued you."

"Worse. They set out another gnome. Figuring I'd bust up the first, Ariadne had cast and painted a second."

"I thought life was mellow here in the wine country."

"Then they tell me," Ned continued, "if I bust up the second one, they'll put a third on the lawn, *plus* they'll manufacture a bunch and sell 'em at cost to anyone who wants a Ned Pearsall gnome."

"Sounds like an empty threat," said the tourist. "Would there really be people who'd want such a thing?"

"Dozens," Billy assured him.

"This town's become a mean place since the pâté-and-brie crowd started moving in from San Francisco," Ned said sullenly.

"So when you didn't dare take a sledgehammer to the second gnome, you were left with no choice but to pee on their windows."

"Exactly. But I didn't just go off half-cocked. I thought about the situation for a week. *Then* I hosed them."

"After which, Henry Friddle climbed on his roof with a full bladder, looking for justice."

"Yeah. But he waited till I had a birthday dinner for my mom."

"Unforgivable," Billy judged.

"Does the Mafia attack innocent members of a man's family?" Ned asked indignantly.

Although the question had been rhetorical, Billy played for his tip: "No. The Mafia's got *class*."

"Which is a word these professor types can't

even spell," Ned said. "Mom was seventy-six. She could have had a heart attack."

"So," the tourist said, "while trying to urinate on your dining-room windows, Friddle fell off his roof and broke his neck on the Ned Pearsall gnome. Pretty ironic."

"I don't know ironic," Ned replied. "But it sure was *sweet.*"

"Tell him what your mom said," Billy urged.

Following a sip of beer, Ned obliged: "My mom told me, 'Honey, praise the Lord, this proves there's a God.'"

After taking a moment to absorb those words, the tourist said, "She sounds like quite a religious woman."

"She wasn't always. But at seventy-two, she caught pneumonia."

"It's sure convenient to have God at a time like that."

"She figured if God existed, maybe He'd save her. If He didn't exist, she wouldn't be out nothing but some time wasted on prayer."

"Time," the tourist advised, "is our most precious possession."

"True," Ned agreed. "But Mom wouldn't have wasted much because mostly she could pray while she watched TV."

"What an inspiring story," said the tourist, and ordered a beer.

Billy opened a pretentious bottle of Heineken,

provided a fresh chilled glass, and whispered, "This one's on the house."

"That's nice of you. Thanks. I'd been thinking you're quiet and soft-spoken for a bartender, but now maybe I understand why."

From his lonely outpost farther along the bar, Ned Pearsall raised his glass in a toast. "To Ariadne. May she rest in peace."

Although it might have been against his will, the tourist was engaged again. Of Ned, he asked, "Not another gnome tragedy?"

"Cancer. Two years after Henry fell off the roof. I sure wish it hadn't happened."

Pouring the fresh Heineken down the side of his tilted glass, the stranger said, "Death has a way of putting our petty squabbles in perspective."

"I miss her," Ned said. "She had the most spectacular rack, and she didn't always wear a bra."

The tourist twitched.

"She'd be working in the yard," Ned remembered almost dreamily, "or walking the dog, and that fine pair would be bouncing and swaying so sweet you couldn't catch your breath."

The tourist checked his face in the back-bar mirror, perhaps to see if he looked as appalled as he felt.

"Billy," Ned asked, "didn't she have the finest set of mamas you could hope to see?"

"She did," Billy agreed.

Ned slid off his stool, shambled toward the men's room, paused at the tourist. "Even when cancer withered her, those mamas didn't shrink. The leaner she got, the bigger they were in proportion. Almost to the end, she looked *hot.* What a waste, huh, Billy?"

"What a waste," Billy echoed as Ned continued to the men's room.

After a shared silence, the tourist said, "You're an interesting guy, Billy Barkeep."

"*Me?* I've never hosed anyone's windows."

"You're like a sponge, I think. You take everything in."

Billy picked up a dishcloth and polished some pilsner glasses that had previously been washed and dried.

"But then you're a stone too," the tourist said, "because if you're squeezed, you give nothing back."

Billy continued polishing the glasses.

The gray eyes, bright with amusement, brightened further. "You're a man with a philosophy, which is unusual these days, when most people don't know who they are or what they believe, or why."

This, too, was a style of barroom jabber with which Billy was familiar, though he didn't hear it often. Compared to Ned Pearsall's rants, such boozy observations could seem erudite; but it was all just beer-based psychoanalysis.

He was disappointed. Briefly, the tourist had

seemed different from the usual two-cheeked heaters who warmed the barstool vinyl.

Smiling, shaking his head, Billy said, "Philosophy. You give me too much credit."

The tourist sipped his Heineken.

Although Billy had not intended to say more, he heard himself continue: "Stay low, stay quiet, keep it simple, don't expect much, enjoy what you have."

The stranger smiled. "Be self-sufficient, don't get involved, let the world go to Hell if it wants."

"Maybe," Billy conceded.

"Admittedly, it's not Plato," said the tourist, "but it *is* a philosophy."

"You have one of your own?" Billy asked.

"Right now, I believe that my life will be better and more meaningful if I can just avoid any further conversation with Ned."

"That's not a philosophy," Billy told him. "That's a fact."

At ten minutes past four, Ivy Elgin came to work. She was a waitress as good as any and an object of desire without equal.

Billy liked her but didn't long for her. His lack of lust made him unique among the men who worked or drank in the tavern.

Ivy had mahogany hair, limpid eyes the color of brandy, and the body for which Hugh Hefner had spent his life searching.

Although twenty-four, she seemed genuinely unaware that she was the essential male fantasy in the flesh. She was never seductive. At times she could be flirtatious, but only in a winsome way.

Her beauty and choirgirl wholesomeness were a combination so erotic that her smile alone could melt the average man's earwax.

"Hi, Billy," Ivy said, coming directly to the bar. "I saw a dead possum along Old Mill Road, about a quarter mile from Kornell Lane."

"Naturally dead or road kill?" he asked.

"Fully road kill."

"What do you think it means?"

"Nothing specific yet," she said, handing her purse to him so he could store it behind the bar. "It's the first dead thing I've seen in a week, so it depends on what other bodies show up, if any."

Ivy believed that she was a haruspex. Haruspices, a class of priests in ancient Rome, divined the future from the entrails of animals killed in sacrifices.

They had been respected, even revered, by other Romans, but most likely they had not received a lot of party invitations.

Ivy wasn't morbid. Haruspicy did not occupy the center of her life. She seldom talked to customers about it.

Neither did she have the stomach to stir through entrails. For a haruspex, she was squeamish.

Instead, she found meaning in the species of the cadaver, in the circumstances of its discovery, in its position related to the points of the compass, and in other arcane aspects of its condition.

Her predictions seldom if ever came true, but Ivy persisted.

"Whatever it turns out to mean," she told Billy as she picked up her order pad and a pencil, "it's a bad sign. A dead possum never indicates good fortune."

"I've noticed that myself."

"Especially not when its nose is pointing north and its tail is pointing east."

Thirsty men trailed through the door soon after Ivy, as if she were a mirage of an oasis that they had been pursuing all day. Only a few sat at the bar; the others kept her bustling table to table.

Although the tavern's middle-class clientele were not high rollers, Ivy's income from tips exceeded what she might have earned had she attained a doctoral degree in economics.

An hour later, at five o'clock, Shirley Trueblood, the second evening waitress, came on duty. Fifty-six, stout, wearing jasmine perfume, Shirley had her own following. Certain men in barrooms always wanted mothering. Some women, too.

The day-shift short-order cook, Ben Vernon, went home. The evening cook, Ramon Padillo, came aboard. The tavern offered only bar food:

cheeseburgers, fries, Buffalo wings, quesadillas, nachos . . .

Ramon had noticed that on the nights Ivy Elgin worked, the spicy dishes sold in greater numbers than when she wasn't waitressing. Guys ordered more things in tomatillo sauce, went through a lot of little bottles of Tabasco, and asked for sliced jalapeños on their burgers.

"I think," Ramon once told Billy, "they're unconsciously packing heat into their gonads to be ready if she comes on to them."

"No one in this joint has a chance at Ivy," Billy assured him.

"You never know," Ramon had said coyly.

"Don't tell me you're packing in the peppers, too."

"So many I have killer heartburn some nights," Ramon had said. "But I'm *ready*."

With Ramon came the evening bartender, Steve Zillis, whose shift overlapped Billy's by an hour. At twenty-four, he was ten years younger than Billy but twenty years less mature.

For Steve, the height of sophisticated humor was any limerick sufficiently obscene to cause grown men to blush.

He could tie knots in a cherry stem with just his tongue, load his right nostril with peanuts and fire them accurately into a target glass, and blow cigarette smoke out of his right ear.

As usual, Steve vaulted over the end gate in

the bar instead of pushing through it. "How're they hangin', Kemosabe?"

"One hour to go," Billy said, "and I get my life back."

"*This* is life," Steve protested. "The center of the action."

The tragedy of Steve Zillis was that he meant what he said. To him, this common tavern was a glamorous cabaret.

After tying on an apron, he snatched three olives from a bowl, juggled them with dazzling speed, and then caught them one at a time in his mouth.

When two drunks at the bar clapped loudly, Steve basked in their applause as if he were the star tenor at the Metropolitan Opera and had earned the adulation of a refined and knowledgeable audience.

In spite of the affliction of Steve Zillis's company, this final hour of Billy's shift passed quickly. The tavern was busy enough to keep two bartenders occupied as the late-afternoon tipplers delayed going home and the evening drinkers arrived.

As much as he ever could, Billy liked the place during this transitional time. The customers were at peak coherency and happier than they would be later, when alcohol washed them toward melancholy.

Because the windows faced east and the sun lay west, softest daylight painted the panes. The

ceiling fixtures layered a coppery glow over the burnt-red mahogany paneling and booths.

The fragrant air was savory with the scents of wood flooring pickled in stale beer, candle wax, cheeseburgers, fried onion rings.

Billy didn't like the place enough, however, to linger past the end of his shift. He left promptly at seven.

If he'd been Steve Zillis, he would have made a production of his exit. Instead, he departed as quietly as a ghost dematerializing from its haunt.

Outside, less than two hours of summer daylight remained. The sky was an electric Maxfield Parrish blue in the east, a paler blue in the west, where the sun still bleached it.

As he approached his Ford Explorer, he noticed a rectangle of white paper under the driver's-side windshield wiper.

Behind the steering wheel, with his door still open, he unfolded the paper, expecting to find a handbill of some kind, advertising a car wash or a maid service. He discovered a neatly typed message:

> *If you don't take this note to the police and get them involved, I will kill a lovely blond schoolteacher somewhere in Napa County.*
>
> *If you do take this note to the police, I will instead kill an elderly woman active in charity work.*

You have six hours to decide. The choice is yours.

Billy didn't at that instant feel the world tilt under him, but it did. The plunge had not yet begun, but it would. Soon.