



**OUTSIDE
THE**

LINES

THE TERRIFYING NEW NOVELLA
BY

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4.

THE PROFESSOR

Andrew's second trip from the land of unconsciousness was even more unpleasant than the first. The knot on his head was a throbbing Vesuvius ready to erupt. This pain was coupled with the almost immediate realization that his hands were bound behind him.

He opened his eyes. It was pitch black, but he was already as adjusted to it as he could get. He lay on an unfamiliar couch in what he thought was the living room of the house he'd dashed into. He could see only the lumpy silhouettes of furniture, and the banister of a staircase rising up from the far side of the room. His last few minutes of memory were hazy, but he could recall that prick bashing him.

A tiny flame flared across the room in the darkness, startling him. It floated up and lit the tip of a cigarette. A curl of smoke drifted up. In the glow, he could see his former-prisoner's face watching him from a recliner. The blood was off his face now, but his nose was still ruined.

The kid waggled Andrew's gun. "Hope you don't mind."

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“Let me go,” Andrew said.

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m a police officer. Do you know how much trouble you could get in for this?”

“Probably about as much as I could for robbin a bank.” The kid grinned toothily, but it only lasted a second. “Besides, I’m a little more concerned with what just happened than I am with how bad my wrist is gonna get slapped when this is over.”

“If that’s true, why bother knocking me out at all?”

“Well...gotta take those opportunities when they come, Officer Andrew.”

Andrew sat up on the couch and leaned over in case the vomit in the back of his throat decided to go for the gold. His head was woefully sore, but it was just a miracle he didn’t have a concussion. “How long was I out?”

“Just long enough for me to cuff you, throw you on the couch, clean up what’s left of my ear and nose, and find some smokes in the kitchen. Course, you gotta ask yourself, how long is long in a place where night fuckin’ *falls before noon*?” He jabbed a finger at the blinded window. “How is that possible out there, man? What was wrong with those people?”

Andrew recalled the mob of freakish residents. Those rearranged bodies...they looked like something from a B-grade horror movie, monsters you would laugh at unless they were chasing you down the street to tear you apart. “Maybe there was...some kind of accident, like a toxic spill or a disease.”

“Do you realize you’re quoting, like, every zombie movie *ever*? Besides, that theory don’t explain all the other weirdness. I mean, is it just this neighborhood or has something happened to the entire *world*?”

“Oh God, I hope not.” The idea had yet to occur to him. The thought of Joey involved in this mess was sickening. Jesus, *why* had he left the boy to get involved?

They were silent, during which Andrew had time to think about what he’d found at the only other house he’d entered. “Did you...did you see anything in *here*? Anything unusual happen?”

“Again, the word ‘unusual’ has been redefined for me. You gotta be

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more specific than that.”

Andrew shrugged and leaned back against the couch cushions. “Okay, so...you’ve got me fair and square. You’re in control now. What happens next?”

Ronnie stood up, the cigarette bobbing from his lips as he spoke. “What happens next is, I find the keys to the car that’s in the garage, and get the fuck outta this nuthouse.”

“What about me?”

He stuck one index finger in the barrel of Andrew’s gun and mimed pulling the trigger with the other.

“Don’t do that. Please.”

“One less witness. And, like you said, I could get in a lot more trouble for everything I did to you.”

“I saved your life earlier! Twice!”

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way, that’s your problem.”

Panic suffocated him. He didn’t want to die at all, but certainly not like this. He latched on to the last straw in mental reach. “Ronnie...I have a son. Joey. He’s eight-years-old. You saw him at the bank. Don’t take away his father.”

“I grew up *with* a father, and look at me.” The kid shrugged and snuffled blood through his crooked nose. “Trust me, sometimes you’re better off without ‘em.”

Ronnie pointed the gun at him. Andrew closed his eyes and pressed back into the couch cushions. The silence in the house deepened until they could be at the bottom of a forgotten chasm.

“I ain’t gonna kill you,” Ronnie said finally. “I just want you to remember that I *coulda*, in case we’re ever facin one another across the courtroom. What I *am* gonna do, is chain you to somethin while I make my getaway.”

“Okay. All right, fine.” Andrew was too thankful and breathless to ask for anything more.

Ronnie stubbed his cigarette out on the arm of the couch. “C’mon, get up.”

Andrew wiggled down on the couch until he could stand.

From outside, a blast of noise hit the house, hard enough to rattle the

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windows in their frames.

“What the hell was *that*?” Ronnie whispered.

Dull thuds came from the street. They looked at one another a second longer, and then leapt for the window. Ronnie pulled the blinds far enough apart for them to see outside.

A monstrous shadow, cast by the still blazing streetlights, moved up the street away from them. The side of the house next door blocked the source, but judging from its silhouette, it looked big enough to be a dinosaur. That roar came again, more distant this time.

“Jesus,” Ronnie whispered.

“Maybe we could see it better from another window.”

They pelted down the hallway that ran beneath the staircase and into a room on the far end of the house. Ronnie threw open a door to reveal a bedroom the owners had converted to a hobby and display area. One of the streetlights shone almost directly through the room’s only window, revealing shelves upon shelves of antique baby dolls lining the walls, some of them fancy Chinas with frilly dresses, others no more than plastic babies with wisps of hair and only diapers for clothing. Their dull eyes stared, unblinking.

The window had a workbench table beneath it, so anyone sitting at it could look out. The remains of several dolls rested on top, in the process of cleaning and refinishing. They looked out, Andrew having to lean awkwardly over the table with his hands still behind him.

This view had a better angle on the street, but whatever unspooled that deformed shadow was too far gone to see. Andrew caught one last glimpse of chitinous legs and an elongated spine, the shape more foreign even than those prehistoric lizards Joey got so excited about.

“That ain’t real,” Ronnie whispered. “It *can’t* be.”

Andrew started to answer, but one of the baby dolls on the table in front of him caught his eye. It lay on its back, a foot long from hairless head to plastic toe, with cherubic cheeks and those weighted eyes that closed when laid prone. It wore nothing but a diaper; impossible to tell if its creators had intended it to be male or female. Its arm was detached next to it, its head partially turned away on the neck joint.

As he watched, it swiveled to face him.

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Its eyes slid open.
Andrew jumped away from the table.

At first Ronnie thought the cop was trying to run, but then he heard the yelp and turned in time to see the man skipping backward halfway across the room, his handcuff chain jingling behind him. He wore a look of surprised disgust.

“What?” Ronnie demanded. He was already keyed up about that thing outside, as jumpy as a two-day clean heroine addict. “What is it?”

“That doll! It moved!”

Ronnie looked down at the table. The three dolls in pieces on it stared back at him, but none of them so much as twitched. He finally managed to get enough of a breath to ease his tense lungs. “What, you think that’s funny? Cause I gotta tell ya--”

He trailed. On the shelves behind Andrew, there was movement. The other dolls stirred. They stood and raised their glass and plastic arms above their heads. Andrew spun.

The menagerie of dolls lining both walls hopped up and down like excited kindergarteners, bending at joints they shouldn’t have. Their tiny feet thumped down against the wood of the shelves, creating a miniature rumble. Ronnie could see their blank-eyed smiling faces, and a severe terror filled up his stomach like ice water.

Then they were all speaking at the same time in chattering voices, one word overlapping a hundred times.

“Trofonag!” they squealed. “Trofonag, Trofonag, Trofonag!”

The word made him feel unutterably filthy, and sick to his stomach. Images flashed through his head, surfacing from his subconscious without permission, horrible things he’d seen, terrible things he’d done.

Yet it was so hypnotic.

Ronnie slapped hands over his ears. Andrew, not having the benefit, shouted, “*STOP!*”

At his command, the chanting quieted. All at once the dolls rushed forward off their shelves, tumbling down in an avalanche of silk dresses and cloth diapers. They crashed to the carpet, falling all over one another,

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then got up and trotted toward them with hands outstretched, like children begging to be held. Ronnie and Andrew backed away in unison.

Scrabbling behind them. Ronnie turned to find more dolls of all sizes marching out of the closet, an entire army. They spread out in a rough semicircle, moving to form a ring around them with their brothers and sisters.

“Get back!” he shouted, raising the gun. “Leave us alone!” It didn’t faze them.

“Just run!” Andrew told him.

They charged the door, Ronnie in the lead. The dolls covered nearly the entire floor now, and he was forced to step on some and kick others. Their squirming bodies felt disgusting underfoot. The ones that weren’t trodden snatched at his legs as he ran, a few of them gaining handholds on his jeans. He ripped them off and flung them away.

In the hallway, dolls poured out of every other doorway in impossible numbers, climbing over one another in their haste to get to them.

And now they were singing.

“*Calling all lost souls, calling all lost souls,*” they crooned, to the time-tested, multi-purpose theme of “Nanny-Nanny-Boo-Boo.” “*Trofonag is here...to bathe in your fear...*”

“*Stop it!*” Ronnie screamed. He fired the pistol this time as they closed in. The bullets punched through several dolls at a whack, shattering porcelain limbs, lopping off plastic heads, but for every one he incapacitated, three more came forward to take its place.

“*...Where did He come from, where did He go?*” they continued. “*Took the Filament for a ride and now its open wiiiiide...*”

Ronnie waded into them in a frenzy, kicking and stomping like Godzilla in the middle of Tokyo. They grabbed and clutched, their collective weight bogging down each step as though he were wading through a mud pit. He kept moving, pushing through their growing masses and knocking them from his legs until he reached the dim living room. The front door was open, letting in enough light to see more of the little bastards come running in from outside, into the already packed floor space. The stairs were the only open avenue. He scrambled up them.

“*Ronnie!*”

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In his frantic terror, he'd forgotten about Andrew. The cop made it through the living room, to the base of the stairs, but then the armada of fake babies overwhelmed him, probably because he had no hands to use for defense. He went to his knees with his arms still behind him. The dolls swarmed over his waist and shoulders, trying to pull him back into their midst. His face was a study in wide-eyed horror.

Ronnie hesitated, looked up the remaining stairs at the relative safety of the landing...and then turned and leapt down toward Andrew.

He grabbed the man's shirt front—dolls instantly leaping for his arm and dangling from his wrist—and hauled. Andrew fell forward, landing full out on his stomach against the stairs. He got his feet under him and shoved. With Ronnie pulling too, they freed him from the clutches of the glassy-eyes monsters. They were both on their butts now, climbing upward a step at a time, kicking at the dolls that tried to follow.

The delay gave the ones in the living room time to mount the side of the stairwell. Their cute little limbs dragged them through the bars of the banister. Ronnie pushed Andrew ahead and started punching them with his free hand, knocking them into the teeming mass filling up the living room like the middle of an ant hill. He put the barrel of the gun right up against the face of one with painted Kabuki features and saw its microscopic black eyebrows draw up in surprise just before he pulled the trigger, turning it into melted plastic. When he saw Andrew was at the top and on his feet again, he crawled up after him.

"Here, c'mon!" Andrew shouted. He stood in a doorway just ahead. Ronnie ran through and slammed the door shut, then put his back against it. This was another dark bedroom, a kid's room judging from the cartoon posters, but at least there were no dolls.

Within seconds, tiny fists beat and clawed at the other side of the door, just like at the fence. It shuddered from their sheer volume. And these things were smarter than the zombie mutants; the knob rattled as they tried to turn it.

"What now? There's no lock on this door!"

"Get me out of these cuffs!"

Ronnie shook his head. "No way!"

Andrew nodded toward the room's window. "We have to go out on

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the roof. I can't do it with my hands tied behind me."

Ronnie gritted his teeth, then reached in his pocket for the handcuff keys he'd taken off the cop. "Fine, come here!"

Andrew backed up to him, and Ronnie undid both bracelets. When the cop turned to face him, he expected to get punched—and knew he probably deserved it—but Andrew only said, "Give me a chance to get the window up."

He crossed the room, pulled the latch, and raised the glass. The fake night outside rushed into the room. Andrew slid out feet first and disappeared momentarily, then his hand came back to wave Ronnie out.

As soon as his weight was off the door, it swung open. The dolls had formed a ladder with their bodies to reach the knob. They rushed after him as he climbed out onto the narrow, shingled ledge beyond the window.

Andrew was to his left, at the edge of a jutting eave over the backyard porch. "We can jump to the next house from here!"

Ronnie came up next to him and looked over. There was a gap of two yards from the edge of this roof to that of the next, with a wickedly-sharp fence below. "No way, we can't make that!"

"It's either jump, or stay here!" He pointed at the dolls already crawling onto the roof. Without another word, he backed up for a running start and jumped across the distance, not even stumbling on the far side. Andrew stood on the slanted surface and waved for him to follow.

Ronnie gave himself the same running room. He took off, pelting down the slope, but as first one foot and then the other left the safety of the roof, he could tell it wasn't enough, he wasn't going to make it.

He hit the other side on his stomach, legs dangling off the edge. Andrew grabbed his wrists and dragged him the rest of the way up. He flipped over on his back and watched as the dolls lined up along the edge of the roof they'd just come from, all of them still bouncing and holding their arms out. It reminded him of the mosh pit at a metal concert, with less Goth clothing and metal studs.

"Yeah motherfuckers, whatcha think about *that*?" he taunted.

"I believe that's mine." Andrew plucked the pistol out of his hand during his distraction.

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“Aw, shit.” Ronnie looked up at him. “So what, you gonna put me back in the cuffs?”

“I think we’re beyond that by now.”

There were howls from the direction of the street.

Ronnie got up. “Jesus, what now?”

The crowd of freakish suburbanites raced up the sidewalk toward them, at least fifty of them now, clawing at the air in their direction.

“Goddamn it, they must’ve heard the gunshots!” Andrew said. “We gotta get out of this house before they catch us!”

But it was too late. They raced across the roof to the nearest second floor window, which Andrew kicked out. Ronnie sliced his hands on a few shards as they rolled through onto a neatly made bed. By the time they could get out of the room and into the hallway beyond, the entire house was alive with the sounds of glass breaking on the lower floor and pounding at the doors.

“*What do we do?*” Ronnie demanded. He couldn’t figure out if the shrieks and growls of the mob tearing its way into the house was worse than the singing of the dolls.

“*I don’t know!*”

There was a rusted squeal behind them. They spun and clutched at each other in horror.

At the other end of the hallway, the wide air-conditioning vent in the base of the wall was raised. A gray-haired man in a tweed suit had his head poked out through the opening, staring up at them with calm clarity.

“Step this way, if you would gentlemen,” he said, with the most snobbish non-British accent Ronnie ever heard.

They looked at one another, still holding each other like schoolgirls.

“I would recommend haste,” the man added, withdrawing into the dark depths of the vent shaft. “As you may have realized, time is something of a factor.”

After a few minutes of slithering on elbows and stomach, with Ronnie practically up his ass and the older man’s Oxford shoe soles in his face (and the pistol ready to be whipped up at a moment’s notice, in case ei-

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ther of them should try something he deemed threatening), Andrew began to suspect the air vent was no longer an air vent. He didn't know when they'd crossed the line in the dark tunnel, but the narrow metal walls had turned to rough stone and widened until they had room to crawl on hands and knees with room to spare. The sounds of the horde diminished behind them, and ahead was a clean, white light.

Finally, there was a squeal of hinges and the man in the brown tweed suit climbed out into another room. Andrew followed, ready for anything.

They were in what appeared to be a basement, an L-shaped room with cinderblock walls, concrete floor, low wooden ceiling, and a staircase in front of them that led up to a closed door. Coleman electric lanterns hung at regular intervals from the rafters, casting a soft but thorough glow around the room. The place was lined with mounted shelves of tools and other junk, a few pieces of dusty exercise equipment in the far corner, and a bicycle leaned against the stairwell.

Ronnie crawled out beside him and got to his feet while the man who led them here hurried across the basement to the far wall. He was a few inches shorter than Andrew, average build, with silver hair and a neatly cropped mustache and full-beard to match. He placed his palms flat against the cinderblock thumb-to-thumb with fingers splayed and paced to the right, crossing one hand over the other, like someone taking approximate measurements.

"Is this...is this the same house?" Ronnie gawked at their new surroundings.

"And if it is, how did that vent shaft get us down to...the..." The wall they'd just come from was solid cinderblock, not so much as a chip missing. The vent or hole or tunnel or whatever got them here was gone. Why this should surprise him after everything else was a mystery, but Andrew could feel his brain stretching like Silly Putty to encompass the contradiction of yet another physical law it depended on.

"It's actually a rather stately Victorian Gingerbread from three streets over," their savior said, while still continuing that odd hand-over-hand appraisal of the basement wall. "One of the nicer houses in this suburb, but I daresay the owners paid far too much over market."

"H-how—?"

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"I shifted us between the two locations." The man had a voice that screamed upper crust, the kind of cadence and diction Andrew would've expected from a New England prep school graduate. He stopped his inspection long enough to turn his head and tell them, "Time and space have little meaning here, gentlemen."

Ronnie glanced at Andrew, and hooked a thumb at the older man.

"*Time* and fuckin' *space*?" the kid asked. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Ah yes, the profanity." The other man's lip curled peevisly as he reached the corner of the basement and turned to the wall that ran to their right. "Never a challenge to tell when one is from the twenty-first century."

"Hey old man, I've had my nose broken, my ear bit off, and just nearly got torn apart by a bunch of Cabbage Patch rejects! It's been a hel-luva day, so I'll cuss if I want! And what's with the wall anyway? You two wanna be alone?"

"I'm checking for weaknesses."

"Jesus, he's as nuts as everything else around here!"

"Ronnie, cool it for a second," Andrew told him. He waited till the older man had finished up his examination and faced them with hands clasped behind him. "I saw you earlier. You were in the house I went in after the accident, weren't you?"

"Yes. I was hoping you would both come in. I couldn't afford to risk making contact with only one of you."

"And you opened the gate," Ronnie said. "When we were running from those messed-up people, you waved us into that backyard."

"Correct. I was attempting to keep you safe until I could approach you unseen, in order to bring you to this haven I prepared."

Andrew nodded. "Well, thanks for helping us out. I'm—."

"I'm aware of your names, Mr. Horner."

"Okay then, how about telling us who *you* are? Do you know something about what's going on?"

The older man nodded crisply and rubbed at his thick, gray beard, cupping his entire chin as he did so. "My name is Edward Manners, if such titles really apply anymore. No one has called me that in...well, eons,

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I suppose. As to your second question, yes, I know a bit about what's going on. I am, after all, the one that set it in motion."

"*You* did this?" Ronnie was back across the room in a flash, in Manners's face. "Then *undo* it, put things back the way they were!"

"Perhaps I should clarify. My research and preparation made this staging dock possible, but I had nothing to do with its actual execution, and I have no means of curtailing events at this juncture."

"*What?*" Ronnie cocked a fist. "Speak English you old fuck, or I swear to Christ, I'll cave your face in!"

Manners cast a blithe eye on him, not flinching from the aggression. "Young man, if you think anything you could threaten me with will make a difference, or even frighten me in the least, be my guest. But we have only minutes, so I suggest you listen to what I have to tell you about your present predicament."

"Ronnie, step away from him." Andrew clicked the hammer back on his pistol without raising it. "Right now."

Ronnie's fist hovered another few seconds before he let it fall. He snorted through his clogged nose and plopped down on one of the bottom steps in defeat.

"I have a son out there," Andrew told Manners. "So, please, just tell us what happened to the world."

"I assure you, nothing has happened to 'the world,' as you put it. It's still ticking along with the same callous indifference it always has. You are just no longer in it."

The silence was so deep in the wake of this offhand statement Andrew felt like he might've gone deaf. "What does that mean? We're on another planet?"

"Not anything quite so easy to explain, I'm afraid. This is more of an alternate reality. An engineered, imperfect, and very limited parallel universe." When they continued to stare, Manners sighed exasperatedly. "Think of your dimension, of everything you know and accept as reality, as occupying a finite space. And everything that is finite, must have a boundary, yes? A skin, so to speak. We are currently within a *bubble* on that skin, a sort of...cancerous growth. And, just as with a cancer, everything appears sane and orderly on the surface—the same way this might

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look like a common neighborhood—because the cells that make up the cancer are, for the most part, nothing but clones of other healthy cells. But beneath that surface is disease and rot, an area that does not follow the established set of rules governing the rest of the body. Does that make sense?”

“Not really, dude,” Ronnie chimed in. “What about all those freaks? They cancer, too?”

“Absolutely. They’re not the real residents that inhabited this neighborhood, but defective—and quite dangerous—copies.”

Andrew considered the senselessly constructed people, sprouting hands from elbows and growing feet out of their backs. And Mr. Childress, dead at his desk with a head that was almost inside-out. Now that Andrew thought about it in this new light, the man’s bloodless wound had seemed more like a severe birth defect than an injury.

They’re all just Xerox copies, he thought, except the toner’s out and the picture is all...fuzzy.

Ronnie was still asking questions. “So then how’d we get into this ‘parallel universe,’ huh?”

“That question has, in my opinion, a quite philosophical answer, but for sake of time, I’ll give you the mechanical one: you entered the affected zone just as the boundaries which define it were sealed off.”

“We colored outside the lines,” Andrew murmured. The words were out of his mouth before he even realized he’d said them. That image of Joey at the kitchen table burned like a lighthouse in the center of his forehead, the crayons sliding over those fat, black lines that marked the edges of Donald Duck’s shirt or Barney Rubble’s hair, out into those empty planes where formlessness ruled.

Ronnie arched an eyebrow, but Manner beamed, lighting up his dreary face. “Yes! That’s an excellent analogy, I’ll have to remember it!”

“You talk like a goddamn college professor,” Ronnie said.

“That’s because I *was* a college professor. Long ago.”

“Yeah, ‘eons,’ right?” The kid rolled his eyes. “So you’re telling us that’s why all this crazy shit is happenin’? Cause we’re in some other universe?”

“This ‘crazy shit,’” Manners said, wrinkling his nose, “is nothing but

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proof that reality as you know it has been suspended in this place. A side effect of its very creation. Madness and chaos reign here, brought about by potent and unpredictable forces.”

“Okay, so we’re in this reality, universe, whatever.” Andrew held his hands in front of his chest, as though gripping an invisible box. “One where dolls can talk and Tyrannosaurus Rex is walking around in suburbia. I don’t understand it, but I get the concept. But how did *it* get here?”

Manners held up a single finger. “*Now* we’re getting to the important questions. Unfortunately, they will have to wait until my return.” He moved toward the staircase.

Andrew rushed over to grab the man’s arm. At the same time, Ronnie jumped to his feet, blocking the stairs.

“No way, dude, you’re not goin anywhere!”

“You can’t just leave us, what are we supposed to do?”

Manners looked from one of them to the other with clinical detachment. “I afraid I must get back, gentlemen, otherwise the Incarnates will find me here and then we’ll *all* be in a mess. When I am able, I will return for you and attempt to secure a passage back to your own world. In the meantime, if I have calculated correctly—which I am positive I have—as long as you stay within the boundaries of this room, you should remain invisible.”

Andrew frowned and ran a tongue over dry lips. “Can I...can I talk to you for a second? Privately?”

Manners sighed, removed a highly polished pocket watch from an inside pocket of his suit coat to check the time, and nodded. Andrew led the man over to a corner of the basement. Ronnie watched them from the stairs with a scowl.

“This is kind of awkward,” Andrew whispered, “but I’m a cop. This kid is my prisoner. He robbed a bank.”

Manners blinked. “And why should this concern me?”

“Well...you know...he’s a criminal.”

“Again, Mr. Horner, I fail to see the connection.”

“He needs to be contained someplace! Locked up! He tried to kill me just a few hours ago!”

Manners shrugged, already starting away from him. “That is some-

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thing you will have to sort out for yourselves. The forces at work here don't care who you are, or *what* you are, so I suggest settling your differences and staying put until I can return."

He climbed the staircase, waited patiently for Ronnie to raise an arm and allow him room to slide by. At the top of the stairs he paused in the basement doorway and called down, "I put some medical supplies in the cupboard beneath the staircase. I didn't know what you might need, but I believe there are, at the very least, a supply of painkillers."

The door closed, and they were alone.

The old guy had to be crazy. Nuttier than a Snickers. Talking about 'alternate realities' and 'parallel universes'. It had all the ingredients of a Sci Fi Channel original movie.

Ronnie wanted to say all these things to Andrew, but didn't.

Partly because he was afraid it would come out too much like he was trying to convince himself of those claims, but also because he didn't want to answer the inevitable question: if the story was crap, then how were they supposed to explain what the hell was going on?

So instead, in the few minutes after Edward Manners left them, and Andrew slid into the floor of the basement next to the stairs to bury his face in his hands (and put the gun on the floor between his legs, oh yes, you better *believe* he had a constant eye on where that game-changer was at all times), Ronnie went around to open the half door beneath the staircase. A leather satchel sat inside. He pulled it out to the middle of the floor, sorting through bandages and iodine until he found what he was looking for.

The bottle's label said "Percocet," right next to a little caricature of a sneering, cross-eyed devil. Below that was "Strangewood Pharmacy," and the address was listed as "666 Filament Drive, Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Further down, he caught sight of the prescribing doctor's name.

Trofonag.

Just reading the word was like taking a skinny dip in raw sewage. He popped the top, shook one pill into his hand, then added another after a moment's thought, and dry-swallowed. His nose and ear would thank him

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once they took affect.

“Any aspirin in there?” Andrew asked.

Ronnie fished another bottle off the bottom of the case and tossed it across the room. The cop frowned at something on the label before opening it. After taking a handful, he rested his head back in his hands.

“What was with that ‘outside the lines’ crap?”

Andrew didn’t look up; his response was filtered through his hands from the cave formed by his knees. “My kid. He likes to color. Gonna be an artist. It was the only thing I could relate all this to.”

“Ohhhh. Outside the *lines*. I get it now. Cute.”

Andrew didn’t respond. The only sound in the room was the barely audible buzzing of the electric lanterns.

“So...how long are we gonna sit here waiting?”

“Until he comes back, I guess.”

“And what if he never comes back?”

Andrew shrugged wearily. “We’ll cross that bridge when we have no other choice.”

“I’m just sayin, it’s been a while since breakfast. Sure would be nice to get some food up in us, right? We could go check out the kitchen in this place...”

The cop finally raised his head. “Manners said to stay down here, so that’s where we’re staying. Just because you’re not in handcuffs anymore, don’t start thinking you’re not under arrest.”

“I know. I heard what you said to him.”

“Good.”

“I also heard what he said back, that we’re supposed to work it out.”

Andrew put a hand on the pistol between his feet. “Fine. This is me working it out. Cops and crooks, remember? Not a democracy.”

Ronnie kicked at the case on the floor in front of him, tossing the contents across the room. It made him feel childish, but he was too angry to care. “This is bullshit! I get it, you’re a cop, you take guys like me to jail, that’s the natural order of things! But you *didn’t* take me to jail, man, and this *ain’t* the natural order! This stopped bein about cops and crooks when my life got put in danger!”

“Says the guy who beamed me in the brainpan the first chance he got.”

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“Okay, that was wrong, I’m sorry. All I’m sayin is, this shit is happenin to both of us, and it ain’t fair that you’re makin all the decisions!”

He sat there after his unprepared speech ran out, the rattling of that many words through his skull making his broken nose throb. Andrew sat across the room for a long second.

“You know what? You’re right.”

“...I am?”

“Yeah. This bust stopped being worth it a long time ago. As usual, I was just too stubborn to see it. You want to go, there’s the door.”

“What, seriously?”

“Yes, Ronnie, you’re free. Get out of here, I don’t care.”

No way was he going to look this gift horse in the mouth or anywhere else. Ronnie jumped to his feet, started up the stairs, and stopped halfway, staring up at the door. Thinking about the world beyond. It was easy to discount talking dolls and mutated ‘burbars down in this safe—*sane*—basement, but probably not so much once he went back out there.

He turned back. Andrew had his head down again. “Um...sure you don’t wanna come?”

“No. I’m staying here.”

Ronnie still hesitated. This was his chance to get away scott-free, an offer that could expire if Officer Andrew changed his mind. Hell, if he left now, maybe he could even find his way back to the cars and get the money.

And do what with it, Ronnie-o? You think the stores around here are still takin cash?

Defeated, he came back downstairs. He went to the opposite direction from Andrew, strolling around the perimeter of the basement, poking into the junk on the shelves, and asked, “I guess that means you believe him?”

“You’re still here?”

“Where else am I gonna go?”

Andrew leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know what I believe. I knew all along that something was off about this place, but I kept denying my instincts. Hell, I think I knew something was off before we even got here. What Manners told us, it’s absolutely insane, but...so is everything we’ve seen with our own two eyes. Until I have

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some better way to rationalize that, I'm going to listen to the one person who hasn't tried to rip our heads off."

"I got a way to rationalize it, dude. We're both in the hospital after that mondo car accident, on the hardest morphine trip in history."

Andrew cracked a half-smile, and nodded. "Believe it or not, that's kind of comforting."

"And what happens if the good professor don't exactly have our best interests at heart? He already said he's responsible for all this."

"Then we're not much worse off than we were before. But he helped us out back there. If there's a chance he can get me out of this, I have to trust him. I've got to get back to my son."

Ronnie wheeled the bicycle leaning against the staircase out to the middle of the floor, turned it to face Andrew, and straddled the seat. "You know, you keep talkin about your-kid-this and your-kid-that, but no mention of a wife. She dead or what?"

"No. We're divorced. I get Joey every other week."

"Yeah, I remember the little dude. So, if you're half-Chinese, that's make him a quarter, right?"

"*Korean*. I'm half-Korean."

"Right, whatever. I'm just sayin, he didn't look, you know, *chinky*."

Andrew made a hissing sound between his teeth. "From you, I'll take that as a compliment. He looks like his mother."

"Gotcha. Do you miss her and shit?"

Andrew sighed. "Look, if I'm stuck with you, I'd rather not give out my life story, all right?"

Ronnie shrugged and looked away. The room blurred a bit when he moved his head. Those Percs must be taking effect. "Fine, whatever. Just makin conversation."

"I'm fine with conversation. But if we're getting personal, I think a much more interesting question would be, how'd you know you'd get away with it?"

"With what?"

"Robbing the bank."

"You call this gettin away with it?"

Andrew waved a negation. "No, I mean if we hadn't crossed over into

OUTSIDE THE LINES

Oz, and I didn't just happen to be there. You were practically safe even with me on your tail. Did you case the joint, test reaction times?"

"Naw, I'm no pro. It was just the first place I saw, man."

"Wow. Talk about getting by on stupid, blind luck."

"Again, I don't know if I'd call endin up here instead of jail 'luck.'"

"Point taken." Andrew grunted. "But *why*? Why'd you do it? You're a young guy, you've got a long life ahead of you, and something like this could get you put behind bars for the rest of it."

Ronnie frowned. Cleared his throat. "I needed some travelin money. And I didn't have time to apply for a loan."

"*Traveling money?* To go where?"

"South. I was...headin down to my brother's place in Tijuana."

"That's perfect." Andrew raised his hands and slapped both knees simultaneously. "You tried to kill me just so you could go to Mexico and party with your deadbeat brother. Why am I even surprised?"

"He's not deadbeat," Ronnie said flatly. "He's just dead."

"Oh."

The Percs were definitely hitting the bloodstream. He could feel god-damn tears welling up in his eyes again, but he didn't want to wipe at them and call attention. So he rubbed at his freezing cold, goose-pimpled arms instead. "He was pretty bad as a kid, sellin drugs and whatnot. We were always close, but my parents—or really just my dad—ran him out of the house when he turned seventeen. He straightened up, got some job with this American logging company and followed it south. I hadn't seen him in, like, six years. Meantime, I got into some shit of my own. A lot of theft, but nothing like this, you see. My dad disowned me too, only it wasn't quite the...the slap in the face it was for Mark. Then I get the word yesterday, he was killed in some accident. I just...I wanted to be there, ya know? To see him one last time before they put him in the ground..."

Andrew's breath plumed in front of his face in a white cloud as he spoke. "Look Ronnie, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"No biggie, man." He wanted to stay with that pain, the grief he'd been keeping at arm's length, but he was too far gone on the meds. Ronnie grinned sleepily. "Hey...is it just me, or did this place get a lot more sub-zero all of a sudden?"

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