

The Day I Met Stephen King

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Let me tell you about the day I met Stephen King. No, that's not really where this story begins. This is about the day *after* I met Stephen King. You see, I'd been a member of the Stephen King Constant Reader Fan Club almost since its inception. It was my life-long dream to meet him in the flesh. I'd written countless fan letters, been to numerous book signings and events, but somehow that meeting never happened. I'd have to go to the bathroom and miss him, end up at the end of a long line for an autograph and miss my chance...so many weird things that kept me from meeting my idol. I'm not a writer, but I am a reader. And to use a line from one well-known book, I'm probably his number one fan. But not in a creepy way; I've never stalked him, never cased his house, never bothered him, except for the letters. But last summer I was on a business trip to Maine, which, as most fans know, is where Stephen King lives, at least in the warm weather. I had always thought that people who signed up for the "Tour of Derry" were weirdos, but I used my only free day from the conference and went on the outing, curiosity winning me over.

The tour itself was a bit of a bust, the places having been more vivid in the window of my imagination. The real thing sometimes pales in comparison to the picture in our heads, doesn't it? Anyway, I got my goofy tourist pictures and headed back to the hotel, that nagging need to actually shake the hand of the man whose writing had taken me to so many places fiercer than ever. I lay in my generic bed with its crunchy sheets and couldn't fall asleep. The next morning I was groggy, out of sorts, and packed up my stuff for my return trip to Ohio with a heaviness in my heart. Eventually the keynote speaker concluded the conference with a grandiose air of superiority only he seemed to share, and the airport shuttle carrying the other ten participants and me stopped at a gas station on our way out. As I walked in the door the little chime went off above my head, and I came face to face with The Man.

I stood there like a complete moron, mouth open, eyes bugging out of my head. He was probably used to this reaction and I pitied him in that moment. How must it be to have people gawking at you while you went about your daily life? He had a powdered donut in one hand and car keys in the other. A long-ago caption from a tabloid magazine article flashed through my head: "STARS! They're just like us!" And so here was my idol, paying for gas and going in for carb overload. I stepped back out of the door and stammered something unintelligible. I hoped it sounded like admiration but not to the point of hopeless fandom. I couldn't think of a single thing to say. I was blowing it! My chance was in front of me and I was missing it yet again. Idiotically, I just stuck my hand out and said, "Good to meet you, sir."

"Thank you," he said. I'd built up so much hope for this opportunity--so many scenarios had gone through my head. What a let down to the moment I'd rehearsed for so long! My hand still stuck out like a junior high kid with a woody in health class. He put his keys in

his pocket and shook it. The moment his hand touched mine, though, things changed. A shock--no that's too small a word, a *jolt* of electricity shot up my arm and through my whole body. My heart felt like it was exploding in my chest. *So this is what dying is*, I thought as my eyes closed. After quite a scene including a fire truck, an ambulance, two police cars, a defibrillator, a trip to the hospital, and a 10-day stay in the ICU, I was back in Ohio. Massive heart attack and triple bypass surgery. But I was going to live, something for which my wife was extremely grateful, and the reason she was now limiting my diet to "healthy food." I was happy to be alive, but less than thrilled about the copious amounts of lettuce I was being force fed.

Cardiac rehab is a bitch, I'll tell you. In spite of the encouragement of my rehab therapist, who I resented probably more than was warranted, I felt like an infant. I woke up tired and went to bed tired. I was off work and felt like a caged lion in a zoo, even though I was free to go out for a walk any time I wanted. If you've never been to Ohio in August, I'll tell you it's no picnic. Walking in the humidity sounded more dangerous than a heart attack.

Then things got really weird. At first I had dreams about Stephen King stories I'd read. His characters haunted me. Some just came to chat, others liked to take me on little field trips to their realities. These were more frightening, more intense, and became more common. Eventually their stories started spinning out in other directions, places I could never have come up with on my own in a million years. I was a great consumer of books, but, as I said, I'm no writer. When it comes to creativity I'm as useful as a brick is to a butterfly. I have an imagination, I just need someone else to drive it.

My sleep became effected because my wife, Maureen, mentioned it to me one morning as I ate my dry whole wheat toast and plain oatmeal, "You tossed and turned until at least two in the morning." She said this like an accusation, like yelling to the Aronson's down the street: "Your dog pooped in the tulip beds again" as they walked their golden retrievers.

"Sorry," I said. "Hope I didn't keep you awake."

"You did," she said, her lips a thin white line of disapproval.

As if I had any choice in the matter. "Sorry. You're more than welcome to wake me up so I can go to the couch, you know," I said.

"Jefferson," she said, not Jeff, "if there was any chance I could have gotten you up out of a dead sleep, you know I would." With that, she took my dishes and stacked them in the sink, whooshing out of the kitchen in her robe like theater curtains. I hadn't even finished my oatmeal.

Two weeks later I left to resume my rewarding job selling insurance to people who hadn't really thought about death, until I called them on the phone and reminded them of

their own mortality. I got in my late-model American car, turned on the engine, and headed toward the office, the impact of the subject now heavier on me than a month ago. I parked in the handicapped spot--I had a fancy schmancy temporary permit and I intended to squeeze every drop of use out of it while I could. I opened the door to the building and that's when my world toppled.

The scene before me was not my office. I couldn't stretch my mind to make sense out of what I was looking at. Plants I'd never seen clung to the walls, spilling out a stench of fetid evil, and a spiral staircase descended into endless depths. It was dark. The fluorescent lights that had seemed to cause headaches were no longer recessed into the ceiling. A single bare lightbulb hung from a dark chain covered in some kind of green growth. I tried to scream but only managed a squeak. Everything here seemed sinister and wrong. I retreated back through the doorway and let it swing shut on its own with a crack that seemed final and irrefutable.

I stood in the hot sunshine panting, sweating. For a brief moment I thought that I was having another heart attack. My pulse was racing faster than when I was doing my rehab treadmill routine. I sipped the fresh air and brought replenishing oxygen into my lungs. Bent over with my hands on my knees, I slowed my breathing, trying to recover.

I saw Josh Perkins walking through the parking lot toward the door. He gave me a quizzical look--he was no good Samaritan and had been vying for my job for the last three years. I wondered if he had been delighted by the news that I'd had a heart attack, and bitterly disappointed after hearing that I had made it through and was more or less okay. In spite of my dislike for the man, I tried to tell him not to go in, but the words didn't come. He was past me and through the door with his typical air of superiority before I could.

I waited for him to come back out screaming, but he didn't. I was certain he'd been snatched or consumed by one of the vicious man-eating plants. I struggled with indecision--do I put myself at risk and try to rescue him? Or do I leave the schmuck to his fate? Decency won out. I steeled myself and yanked the door open. The receptionist looked up at me and smiled. "Hey Jeff! Good to see you!" Callie gave no indication that anything was out of order, and as I looked around it seemed she was right. No plants, no staircase, no silent doom lurking in the corners. "Jeff?" She looked concerned and ready to call 911.

"Yeah," I said in a hoarse voice.

"You okay? You look a little shook up."

To Callie it was I who was out of order. I shook myself and smiled to reassure her. I cleared my throat. "Fine," I said. "Just seems like I've been gone for years instead of weeks." She relaxed, her narrow shoulders dropped away from her ears and her candy pink lips returned to their chipper smile.

“I bet. We’re all just glad you’re still with us.” *Except Josh Perkins*, I thought. All of this had to be my imagination. Maybe a leftover string from one of the nightmares I’d had.

“My office is still that way, right?” I said with a laugh. She pointed.

“Down the hall, last door on the left,” she said, laughing too. Situation diffused.

I saluted her and went to my office to resume the humble life of the insurance salesman.

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I was relieved when four o’clock came and I could return home. I was completely wiped out. Who knew that sitting at my desk all day could be so tiring? I’d also had an almost constant stream of well-wishers welcoming me back and apologizing for not visiting. I hadn’t expected that any of them would, it was just their way of absolving themselves for not caring enough. Still, I couldn’t remember ever feeling so wiped after a day of work, but I supposed that’s what almost dying will do to you. The traffic wasn’t horrible as I made my way home. NPR news filled me in on all the recent atrocities in the world and I breathed a sigh of relief as I parked the car in the garage. I sat for a moment reacquainting myself with the normalcy of my world, then went in and kissed Maureen on the cheek and flumped down in the recliner.

She was in the kitchen as she always was at five o’clock, preparing yet another healthy meal. I would have killed for a double quarter pounder with cheese and large fries, but those days were over. “What’s for dinner?” I asked, trying to mask the hopeful, almost pleading note in my voice. She smiled at me sweetly, so I guessed I must have succeeded.

“Big salad, grilled chicken breast, quinoa on the side. How was your day?”

“What the hell is quinoa?” I asked. She frowned.

“It’s like rice, Jefferson, but better for you.” She turned back to the stove. Apparently she didn’t want to know how my day was. I flipped on the TV and lost myself in Jeopardy, mumbling the answers out loud, in the form of a question of course. Dinner was ready before the winner was announced but I snapped off the TV anyway. Maureen didn’t approve of TV at dinner. This was “bonding time” and her wishes in this department were not to be denied.

I masticated the salad. Kale, apparently is good for the body, but is literally difficult to swallow. The chicken was good. I hoped I’d never have to eat another bite of quinoa after this meal was over. I didn’t count on it. Maureen tittered on about water aerobics, her church group, and what minor neighborhood offense Marie Aronson had committed this time. I was only half listening, my thoughts being drawn back again to the aberration that had occurred that morning. I almost said something, but my wife of thirty years would have been on the phone to a shrink before I could finish telling the story.

“Jeff. Are you even listening?” I strained to recall the last thing she had said and conjured a vague idea.

“Yes. Of course. Marie’s husband hasn’t mowed the yard yet.”

“Right. Are you going to do something about it?”

I looked at her questioningly. “What did you want me to do, exactly?”

“Call the neighborhood association, I said!”

Laughing at this pettiness and ridiculousness would be a disastrous decision, subjecting me to her icy cold stare and an evening of uncomfortable silence. “Let’s give them a few days, okay? I don’t want to get the association involved unless it’s really necessary.”

“Fine. Okay.” She stood to clear the table and I wasn’t sad that the meal was over. I wished bitterly for dessert, but knew that idea was nonexistent. Maureen loved me enough to deny my impulses when I couldn’t do it myself, and I loved her for that in spite of my frustration. We spent the evening watching a black on white movie on TCM, then I claimed exhaustion and went to take a shower. It was the God’s honest truth, too.

When I opened the clear glass door to the walk-in shower, however, a sense of déjà vu overwhelmed me. The shower tile that had been there seconds ago was gone. Reality had taken a side step and the land before me was as foreign as it had been at the office, but completely different. The valley below me was lush and green from my mountaintop vantage point. Horses ran together across the landscape and a clean sea stretched out to the horizon and disappeared. A small town reminiscent of a cheesy western movie sat shrouded in a vague layer of dust. As I gawked, a darkness began to press down on me and the scene below. It smelled like dread and felt like evil. A horrible screeching sound, inhuman and not of this natural world reverberated in my ears.

I slammed the shower door and stood there, pudgy and naked against the shuddering glass, pressed against it like a suicidal man on a ledge. Maureen burst in the bathroom door and stopped short, looking at me with a gaping expression. “Jeff, what on earth?” I was sweating all over, I could smell it.

“I’m fine,” I lied. I was anything but fine. What the hell had just happened to me?

“You don’t look fine to me,” she said with her hand on her hip.

Thinking furiously, I said “I just slipped trying to get in the shower, that’s all.” She looked doubtful. “Really, I’m fine. We should probably get a non-slip mat in here,” I offered, changing the subject.

“Well, alright. As long as you’re sure you’re okay.”

“I am, I promise.” She stepped forward and kissed my cheek.

“Don’t forget about your rehab exercises,” she said as she left the room. It was just her way of caring, but it was irritating anyway.

I steeled myself and worked up the courage to open the shower door again, slowly peering around the corner like a kid spying on his parents. It was empty. Gleaming white tile looked back at me. Normal. I reached in gingerly and turned on the water, adjusting the temperature, waiting for something awful to happen. Nothing.

Later, after I'd exhausted myself further with a walk on the treadmill, I lay awake trying to make sense of these two bizarre occurrences. They had a misplaced sense of familiarity...but it was impossible. I'd never traveled further west than Colorado and had visited Florida ten years ago with Maureen, but my waking eyes had never experienced such visions, especially not in Ohio. The most interesting thing you could do here was visit Seneca Caverns or Cedar Point. Maureen had never been interested in that amusement park and certainly wouldn't let me go to now, even if I'd wanted to.

I drifted off to sleep and dreamed of meeting Stephen King in the doorway of the gas station that had almost been my final resting place. He was reassuring me that everything was going to be okay, and that it would all be over soon. It was unclear, but sounded ominous. He ushered me over to a picnic table and produced a photo album that he hadn't been holding in real life. He opened the collection and each sleeve held a book cover. They were in chronological order, including all the different editions. I would know. I owned most of them and could recite the chronology in my sleep, which I guess, in a way, I was. I reached out to touch one and he yanked my hand back. "That one's not yours, Jeff. Yours isn't done."

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I woke up gasping. It had seemed so real, but at the same time it felt like a dream inside a dream. Was this a vision I'd had while the first responders had jump-started me? The dawn light was filtering through the sheer curtains and Maureen was beside me, sleeping with her mouth open. My dreaming must not have disturbed her. Even though the clock said 5:15 am, I decided to get up. Maybe I could sneak some bacon and eggs before she woke up and scolded me. I yawned and stretched, and headed for the bedroom door, but then hesitated. I wondered what would be on the other side. Maureen was stirring. No bacon and eggs for me. I sighed in resignation and turned back to use the en suite john, thwarted in my kitchen raid.

"Jeff, why are you up so early?" She was sitting up with the covers pooled around her waist.

"Thought I'd get a jump on the day and take a walk on the treadmill," I said. She nodded.

"That's good. I'll get the coffee started." It was decaf. What's the point of decaffeinated coffee? I'd endure it and get the real stuff at the office. I watched her out of the corner of my eye while I dug in the dresser for sweatpants, wondering if the world outside was my own or some fantastical version of a story. *A story!* That was it! Maureen opened the door and padded down the thick hallway carpet. I sat back on the bed, my search for exercise wear forgotten for the moment. The things I had experienced were scenes from books!

Stephen King's books to be exact. Books I'd read countless times. So it had to be my imagination. Didn't it?

I spent the workday wondering when another alternate reality might present itself, but everything was as mundane as it ever was. At four, I said goodbye to Callie.

I opened the car door and sat down in a deck chair overlooking a dark and menacing ocean. The sun was setting, a sailboat perched on the horizon. It should have been relaxing and pleasant, but I felt like a storm was coming. Not a physical storm, something cerebral. It felt like danger, like heartbreak was just around the corner. I closed my eyes, breathed "There's no place like home..." and when I opened them, the dusty dashboard of my car was before me, and NPR was recounting the most recent White House scandal. I snapped the radio off and clutched the steering wheel, trying to orient myself. Little beads of sweat popped out on my forehead in spite of the polar vortex as the AC swirled through the interior. When I looked up, I saw the garden tools and half-full garbage cans in my garage. "This is too weird," I said out loud to no one.

I should have been surprised to see Stephen King in my kitchen, whisking eggs in a mixing bowl, with sausage cooking in a skillet as I entered the house, but I wasn't. It had been one of those days. "Sorry," He said without looking my way. "There wasn't any bacon. But I found sausage in the back of the freezer." *Probably where Maureen had hidden it from me.*

"Uh, that's okay," I said. Here was my idol--in my kitchen--and even now I was devoid of speech. I sat down hard on the kitchen chair and just watched him cooking like it was the most normal thing in the world. And where was my wife? She was the one who should have been here making dinner, and it sure as hell wouldn't have been sausage and eggs. It was as if he had read my mind and responded. Was this a dream or a fantasy? Surely it wasn't real.

"The answer to your question is no. And yes. No, it's not a dream or a fantasy, not exactly. And yes, it's real. As real as I want it to be."

"As real as you want it to be?" I asked, incredulous.

"That's wight, wabbit!" He said. He finally turned around to look at me...and was no longer there. Maureen was peering at me with her eyes squinted and her lips pulled into a sphincter. I had no idea what I'd said or done to get this look, had no idea of anything that had transpired over the last hour and a half, in fact.

"Are you listening?" She asked with petulance.

I was on the spot and had to respond. I chose the truth. "I'm sorry, love. My mind was a million miles away just now." *Please don't ask me what the last thing I heard was, because the last thing I can remember you saying to me was goodbye as I left for the office this morning.* Thankfully, she didn't. She turned around with a huff and continued with whatever it was that she'd been doing. Destroying dinner, I supposed. I looked at the

clock which read 5:30. I got up and shuffled into the living room to turn on Jeopardy. Perhaps thirty minutes of Alex Trebek could help me ground myself in the here and now. I lost myself in mindless trivia until Maureen announced that dinner was ready.

I chewed without tasting. Whitefish with wild rice and broccoli. I hated broccoli. You'd think as a sixty year old man I wouldn't be forced to eat broccoli anymore, but you'd be wrong. Apparently free will was cancelled once you had your chest cracked open. Or maybe that happened when you said, "I do". It didn't matter; the end result was the same. So I ate my broccoli pretending it was a steak.

"How was work?" Maureen asked finally. The silence had been getting to me.

"It was good," I said as I swallowed the last bite of horrible green. "Josh Perkins is definitely a schmuck." I laughed the most genuine laugh I could muster and it must have worked because she laughed too. By the end of the meal I was beginning to feel normal again, but I was worried about what would happen the next time I opened a door. Or fell asleep.

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I had no recollection of any strange dreams the next morning, the familiar scents of dry toast and oatmeal greeting me as I sat up on the side of the bed, getting my bearings. After making myself ready for the day, I went to the kitchen where my sad breakfast was languishing on the table. She had attempted to liven the oatmeal up with raisins. I smiled a wan little smile. Maureen may have her faults, but she does try. I kissed her cheek and sat down, feeling thankful that God gave me a woman who had stood beside me for the last thirty-some years with unflinching courage.

I was grateful for an uneventful morning and was looking forward to an equally uneventful day when I got into the car. No such luck. He was sitting in the passenger seat fiddling with the radio, even though it was off. "How can you stand to listen to that depressing shit?" He asked with unfiltered disdain. I was startled, but not speechless this time.

"What depressing shit?" I asked.

"NPR! I mean, it's good to know what's going on in the world but don't you ever crave some good old-fashioned rock and roll? CCR? Bob Seger? Styx?"

"You can listen to whatever you want to," I said, thinking this was the stupidest conversation in the universe. I started the engine and backed out of the driveway. He continued to fiddle with the radio. He gave up, sat back in his seat, and just pointed at the thing. Suddenly the car was filled with the screaming incantations of "Blue Collar Man." He smiled and interlaced his fingers behind his head.

“Isn’t that better?” He asked. Actually, it was. I had always been a Styx fan. When did I stop listening to the radio? When had I stopped listening to music altogether for that matter?

“Sure,” I said. He pointed again and the volume increased to nearly ear splitting levels. He opened the window and did the hand surfing thing while I drove my boring tan Chevy Impala through rush hour traffic. I was transported back in time to when I was in my twenties and driving a Camaro instead. That was before I was married, before the mortgage, before kids, before responsibility and my descent into middle age mediocrity. I arrived at work, exhilarated. I put the car in park and turned to the passenger seat. It was empty. The radio was silent. *Huh. Well that was a heck of a thing*, I thought.

I grabbed my briefcase and got out of the car. Materialized before me was a hallway that seemed to stretch out forever, the carpet that dizzying pattern you could only find in a hotel. I could hear an ominous thudding that seemed to get closer and closer, and insane laughter echoed down the hallway. I wasn’t able to move my feet, yet I was propelled forward, as if in a dream. The sound became louder than ever. There was an elevator at the end and I could see the old-fashioned dial moving as the elevator creaked. I knew exactly where I was. With great effort I turned around to get back in the car, but it wasn’t my car. It was a Buick, from the fifties, and one I almost recognized. Somehow it was like a waiting cat, ready to pounce on me if I got too close or touched that door handle to get myself out of this place. I was stuck between two horrors. I closed my eyes--squeezed them shut like a child wishing the monster in the closet would stay there.

“This isn’t your story,” a voice said. I heard it loud and clear. I opened my eyes to see who had spoken and saw nothing but the parking lot in front of me. I whirled around and my late model American car sat there in the handicapped spot looking...*mundane*, I thought. As in not special, not remarkable. I realized those adjectives described me perfectly and all at once I wanted something more. I wanted to do something greater than selling insurance, going home to my unremarkable suburban ranch house under the rule of a stuffy homeowners association. And I wanted no more lettuce, no more plain toast, no more oatmeal.

Somehow, I reflected, Stephen King seemed to know this about me and was trying to help me find something more. I wasn’t sure how this was possible or why, but I knew it to be fact. Either that or I was being driven insane by a depth of imagination I had never possessed before my heart attack. *You mean, before you met Stephen King*, I thought. And wasn’t that the key to this whole mystery? Why else would I be transported inside the books I’d read? And what about that phrase that kept repeating? What did it mean when he said, “This isn’t your story?” It felt crazy to think I wasn’t in charge of my own destiny.

My feet were planted on the blacktop as if trapped in quicksand. I didn’t want to go into that office building. It wasn’t fear of opening the door, but that some strange destiny was

actually pulling me away. But to where? I turned back toward the car (*MY* car) and contemplated just getting in and driving. The compulsion was too overwhelming to deny, so I did. Opened the door to the plain interior of my car (*thank God*) and started the engine. I drove on autopilot through the city streets of Akron and eventually found myself at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

I followed the signs to long term parking, got on the shuttle bus, and arrived among a throng of busy travelers bound for all points of the compass. I found the United Airlines service desk and asked for a ticket to Bangor. I almost choked when the attendant, a pleasant middle-aged woman who looked as *mundane* as me, quoted the price, but I whipped out my credit card and charged it. Maureen would be able to track my movements, but I didn't care. She was just going to have to accept my absence. Maybe she'd chalk it up to a mental breakdown and call for the men in white coats to transport me to an asylum. If she did, and I was crazy, I hoped it would be nice.

The flight itself was uneventful. I fell asleep and had strange dreams—one of a plane hurtling through the air at 40,000 feet in which I was the sole inhabitant. I was terrified, obviously not knowing how to fly a plane. That dream bled into another where I landed, and the entire population was dead--powdery corpses caught in their last moments, which must have been agonizing. Even in their dried up faces I could see pain and terror.

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A touch on my shoulder jolted me out of my fitful sleep and a woman in a blue uniform told me gently that we had reached our destination and it was time to disembark. "Where are we?" I asked. She looked at me, puzzled and bemused.

"Bangor International Airport, of course," she said with a smile, but I could see a flicker of unease in that smile. *He's not right in the head*, she thought. I could almost hear the words come out of her mouth. I wanted to set her mind at ease, and maybe my own at the same time.

"Of course, sorry. I nodded off there and must have had a heck of a vivid dream," I explained. "Thanks for waking me." She backed up to give me room to exit. I had no baggage other than my tattered briefcase, so no need to stop at baggage claim. You can't pack for a trip you never knew you were taking. I walked down the jetway and looked around the terminal. Although I'd somehow expected it to be empty, there were people sitting at United Airlines gates and milling around. I felt relieved and didn't have a clue as to why.

I walked through the small airport to the Hertz rental desk and requested a car. The woman offered me a Honda Civic. *Mundane*, I thought. She'd probably looked at my generic suit and assumed that's what a guy like me would be most comfortable in. Maybe she was right, but I asked her if she had a convertible. "I've got a Mustang GT, but it's considerably more expensive." I offered her my credit card as reluctantly as I had to the woman who'd sold me the ticket to get here, and she gave me the papers to sign, asking if

I wanted to add extra insurance. I guffawed out loud and she looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Sorry,” I said. “I sell insurance for a living and I’m probably the most over-insured man in America.” She didn’t seem amused. She handed me the keys, directed me to the rental lot, and I got away from the desk as fast as I could before more peals of laughter could erupt. When I was out of earshot, I let loose, laughing almost hysterically while parents guided their children away from the madman strolling through the terminal with tears trickling down his face.

I found the lot, started the car, and revved the engine. The sun was high in the sky and even in this northern country, it was hot. I lowered the top, not caring if the bald spot on top of my head burned so much someone could fry an egg on it. I wasn’t really surprised when, after leaving the airport, I was being guided toward a certain address where a certain author lived. I was nervous and terrified. I felt like I was about to go stand before God and ask about the Meaning of Life. Normally I would have been embarrassed to show up unannounced like a trespasser at the home of a famous person, but intuition had led me to believe I was being brought here, and I was about to discover the truth.

The gate outside the house was secured. I was going to have to pull my hefty boy, middle aged body up and over the fence. I looked around to verify I wasn’t going to be seen, and as I grasped the railing the cell phone in my pocket jingled, letting me know my wife was calling. By now the office had contacted her wondering why I hadn’t arrived for work. She’d be thinking I had gotten in an accident, had a heart attack, or, who knows, been abducted by aliens. Her mind had a keen knack for assuming worst-case scenarios. I ignored it. I’d have texted her to let her know I was okay, but she had refused a cell phone, saying they caused brain cancer. She was calling from our land line, something as old and archaic as a card catalog.

With all the effort my out-of-shape body could summon, I made my way over the fence and landed on my back in a clumsy heap. I lay there looking up at the sky, watching a line of clouds floating over the big house just up the grassy slope from where I was laying. They almost formed an arrow pointing the way to its front door. I sat up rubbing the back of my head, but brushed it off and started up the hill.

I heard a low, sinister growl coming from the bushes and a dark shape bounded toward me. I turned, and just as it lunged at my face, the door behind me opened and the shape turned to smoke, dissipating before I was mauled to death.

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I turned back toward the door and He stood there. I understood at once that this man had somehow created me. He put a hand to his forehead and rubbed His temple in confusion, but also with recognition.

“It’s you,” He said. “This isn’t your story, you know.”

“Then why am I here? Why’d you bring me here?”

“Bring you?” He asked.

“Yeah. All the way from Akron. You pulled me here, now what do you want?” I felt impatient and desperate for answers.

He sat down on the top step, hard. I could hear the click of His teeth and the crunch of His spine. I could actually feel it. “You,” He began and licked His lips. Then He pointed at me. “You haven’t been cooperating very well.”

“What?” I said. I had no idea what He was talking about.

“You won’t behave. I keep trying, but you seem to go off on your own all the time and do what you want. All I can do is sit in front of my computer trying to draw inspiration from my other stories.”

I was beginning to understand where this was going, but I didn’t think I liked it very much. I couldn’t just be a work of fiction. It wasn’t possible. I had a life, a history. I’d only met this man a few weeks ago, and only for a moment. I had sixty years of life behind me.

“You don’t expect me to believe that I’m made up.”

“I guess I can’t expect you to believe it,” He said. He seemed dazed. Maybe I should have called first. “But I promise you that it’s the truth.” It made sense, but that didn’t mean I had to believe it. I believed in the tangible. Things you could touch, taste, and smell. I’d left intuition and metaphysics to the hippies from the seventies who never really grew up and still went to Grateful Dead reunions. I was an insurance salesman with a mortgage and a pension for God’s sake.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve been through lately? I thought I was going insane. Maybe I still am.”

“Of course I know,” He said. “If you’d just cooperate, this would be so much easier. For both of us.”

I still stood down the walkway from where He was sitting, afraid to approach the Master of the Universe. “I think you’d better explain this in a little more detail,” I said. It felt like arrogance, but I thought I more than deserved some explanation.

“Okay, I’ll tell you everything,” He said. For the next forty five minutes or so I listened to Him tell my life story, leading up to our meeting in that gas station and my subsequent heart attack.

“You were supposed to die that day. But you didn’t. You had to go and recover, and you’ve made a wreck of everything.” It explained a lot if you were willing to suspend your disbelief for a little while. The obsession with His books, respecting His privacy, understanding what fame was probably like for Him, even the embarrassment I’d felt

when I had come face to face with Him in the doorway of the Seven-Eleven. And those other worlds? That had been Him trying to gain focus using His past work as a guide.

Suddenly I felt absurdly guilty for having lived through my force five coronary. “Well, it’s an explanation, anyway,” I said. “I’m not sure if I can buy it as the truth, but at least the pieces fit.”

“Are you going to cooperate from now on? I’m pretty sure all this will stop if you just follow what you think of as your intuition. It’s not really your intuition anyway. You know that, right?”

Reluctantly I nodded my head. When I looked deep into my secret heart, I knew He was right. “Yeah, I guess I will. Can I go now?” I asked this like a child asking for a second scoop of ice cream.

“You can go. Just listen, okay?” I nodded again. I finally approached Him sitting on the step and He rose. “It was good to meet you in person, Jeff,” He said and stuck out His hand to shake mine.

“Likewise,” I said. I gripped His hand and felt myself becoming...thinner somehow. Not like losing weight, I felt like I was losing substance. I released His hand as if it was a hot iron. I held mine up in front of me and I could see Him through it as it became transparent. I felt myself losing track of where my body stopped and the air around me began. I looked at Him with startled alarm. “No!” I tried to say, but I’d lost the ability to speak. I felt like I was floating away. The last thing I saw was King brushing his hands together.

“Finally,” He said, but I only saw his lips move. He turned to go back into the house and shut the door just as I floated away.

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“And that’s how I got here,” I say to the tall, craggy man sitting across from me.

“Huh,” he says in response. “There are many ways to end up in this place.” He looked away at a far distant horizon, like he’d been here for a thousand years in his dusty boots and faded denim shirt. It made me wonder how long my sentence would be.

I nod my head. “Cause of Death: Written Out of Existence. It’s hard for me to believe too, but here I am all the same and that’s the only explanation I have,” I say.

“We all have a story here, Jeff. Maybe it will be better this time,” he said. With that, he stood, picked up a beat to death leather bag, pulled a home rolled cigarette out of it, and turned toward the horizon. I hoped he was right. He stopped and turned around, twirling a finger in the air. “You coming?”