

Five Days in Early January

1.

It was snowing lightly, turning to rain, or the other way around. Case turned off the interstate looking for a convenience store. He found one within five minutes. He needed a Ho-Ho.

Not counting his own, there were only two cars in the parking lot when he pulled in. One of them, parked by the dumpster, some kind of SUV painted a ubiquitous gun-metal grey. Case stopped his engine next to a battered Toyota parked without handicapped tags, illegally, in a handicapped spot.

Case stepped out of the car, pocketed his keys, and looked around. A road—and around the road a lot of woods filled with wet black trees. Case stood there a while and felt the wet snow on his face, in his hair. He stood there for a while and then he went inside the convenience store.

The first thing Case looked for was the TV monitor: the image of himself coming into the convenience store and looking for himself.

It didn't take long to find himself on TV. The camera was mounted in the corner of the ceiling with a bird's-eye view of the store. The TV monitor hung from the ceiling in front of the check-out counter right by the entrance. That's pretty much the way it always is, Case reflected.

Behind the counter, some kind of middle-eastern guy was working the cash drawer, even here in Alabama, Pakistani or Arab,

what difference did it make? He had just turned back from fetching a carton of cigarettes for a huge hulking guy in a worn Army surplus jacket. Six-six, at least, the hulk, long, scorched hair draped over his shoulders like a cape and a sunburned bald spot in the middle. Case couldn't see his face but he'd seen a thousand men just like him. A whole country populated by that type of maniac. Back in the day. That accounted for the two cars in the lot. Unless there was a surprise in the toilet, it would be easy money. Pop and grab. Just like back in the day.

The hulking guy at the counter was buying a carton of Camels. That's what Case really wanted, that's what he really craved. Instead, he headed directly for the snack food aisle to look for the box of Ho-Hos.

Nutter Butter. Snackwells. Chips Ahoy. Oreo. Fig Newton. Pepperidge Farm Mini Milano. Keebler. Mrs. Field. Honeymaid Cinammon Sticks. Fifty kinds of Entenmann's cakes, donuts, and cookies.

There wasn't a goddamn box of Ho-Ho's in sight. Case suddenly wondered if they even made Ho-Ho's anymore. It seemed somehow inconceivable to him that they didn't. Maybe they'd been repackaged and were now sold under a different name?

Case picked up a box of generic low-fat cherry pop tarts. He read the list of ingredients on the bottom to waste time. Truth was, Case was waiting for the guy in the army surplus jacket buying the carton of Camels to leave. He figured that a store like this might realistically be worth three, four hundred dollars. No more than fifty dollars on the premises? The cashier doesn't have the combo to the safe. Well, that was a tune that often changed quickly enough once the gun came out. Memories sharpened. People were suddenly capable of small miracles. He'd have to shoot the cashier in the head, of course, fuck up the video somehow. Well, that's how he would do

it back in the day. Just a habit of thinking, now, it was. Like working out a chess problem.

Ha.

He looked up from the cherry poptarts and saw the girl standing at the end of the aisle looking directly at him.

She looked no more than twelve or thirteen, thin, washed-out, waifish. She had a pale little face, stringy hair dyed trailer-trash blonde, and a mouth like a dead rosebud. She was dressed in soiled shorts and a denim jacket with arms long enough for a gorilla. Her skinny white legs were bare and so were her dirty feet inside cork-soled platform sandals.

What the hell was a hardy-dressed kid doing out at this hour, anyway?

Case figured she had to belong to the guy at the register buying the smokes. They were most likely traveling between somewhere and somewhere else. She'd probably been sleeping in the backseat until daddy's nicotine craving drove him off the road into this middle of nowhere. She'd woken up, thrown on the jacket and sandals, and joined daddy in the store. She'd wandered down the snack food aisle just like Case had in search of something artificially sweet.

The kid didn't say anything, just kept staring at Case with haunted eyes. They looked kind of smudged, those eyes, as if she'd been sleeping in her eye makeup. With her pale round face and ashen eyes, she reminded Case of the ghost of a child. She looked like she knew something bad was about to happen. She looked like she knew what Case was thinking. Case, like a lot of crooks, like a lot of people whose life depends on chance, like a lot of people, in other words, was a superstitious man.

He was about to say something, something like “beat it” or “scram” but the kid seemed to see it coming. She put a finger to her lips. It was a thin, filthy finger with a short, broken nail that was painted the color of a blueberry.

At the same time she reached her other hand into the pocket of the jean jacket. When she pulled her hand back out, there was a piece of paper between her dirty fingers. The paper was folded so many times it was about the size of a matchbook. She put the folded paper carefully down on the rack at the end of the aisle where Case was standing. She put it down nestled in the folds of a shiny foil bag of cheese puffs.

Where you got to, girl!

The voice made Case flinch, too. The kid said nothing, but looked paler for a moment or two, like she might fade from visibility altogether. Then the hulking guy rounded the corner of the aisle and stood there towering over the kid. He laid his big paws on her shoulders and you could see the shudder pass through that tiny body from thirty feet away.

Case was right: he’d seen a thousand guys just like this one in his life. And that was a thousand too many. The small shit-colored eyes stared coldly and appraisingly at Case above high wind-burned cheekbones. The rest of the face was covered with a thick John Brown beard threaded through with silver hair that looked like soldering wire.

Those raw-boned hands on her shoulders, that imprimatur of ownership—it was unmistakable. The man didn’t take his two turd-pellet eyes off Case for half-a-second. He had one of the Camels in his mouth already and he lit it with a green disposable lighter. He lit up among all the “No Smoking” signs and squinted through his exhalation at Case.

What I tell you about wandering off on your own, bitch? Lot's of crazy dangerous assholes in the world looking to snatch a sweet young piece like you. You want that to happen?

No daddy. I'm sorry, daddy.

Daddy seemed pleased by the answer, more satisfied than one might have expected. His manner softened, but not by much.

That's better honey. Now you go and git yourself back to the vehicle

Yes daddy.

And off she went.

The man stood there at the head of the aisle staring at Case long and steady. Smoking. Case still had the box of cherry pop tarts in his hand. Felt like an idiot, too. He had the gun in his pocket and he felt like taking it out and shooting the big fat motherfucker in the middle of his big fat motherfucking face, shoot him right there at the end of the snack food aisle.

Sorry if the little one was bothering you mister. It's late. She's a little groggy. She knows I don't like her talking to strangers. It's not safe, you know?

Case knew that the man wasn't really apologizing for anything. What was there to apologize for, anyway? He slowly put the cherry pop tart box back on the shelf and slipped both hands casually into the pockets of his black poplin jacket.

No problem. She didn't say boo to me. Just stood there, looking.

The big man watched Case, looked him up, looked him back down, taking his measure. He took another couple of slow drags on the Camel. A little tic of satisfaction. As if to say, not much to look at, is there? Why? Because Case had glanced away? Because...? He nodded towards the window. You couldn't see anything out of it but the inside of the store reflected back at you. Another scene just like this one.

Okay then. We understand each other. Best me and the girl get back on the road. You take care of yourself.

2.

He seemed to leave an oily groove in the atmosphere, a sucking black hallway that drew Case, like a sleepwalker, halfway down the aisle, as if he were going to follow the bastard right out to the parking lot and settle it all right then and there. Instead, Case stopped at the head of the aisle, hesitated, and noticed the folded piece of paper the girl had left propped on the foil bag of cheese puffs.

He picked it up and continued around the front of the store. He stood behind a sales display of Diet Canada Dry ginger ale boxes and looked out the window at the wet parking lot.

The kid was standing obediently by the locked door of the SUV waiting for her father. She tottered there by the dumpster in her ridiculous platform sandals. The big man jerked open the passenger door. The kid clambered inside. He slammed the door behind her. Then he walked around to the other side of the SUV and climbed behind the wheel. He pulled away without putting his lights on until he'd turned out onto the road. It didn't make a lot of difference about the lights, though. Case hadn't been able to pick out the license plate number in the gloomy shadows of the dumpster either. That was because the SUV didn't have any license plates.

That left only the cashier's battered Toyota. Well, assuming it was the cashier's. He still hadn't seen anyone else in the store, no other customers but the girl and the bearded guy. It was still possible that there was another employee in the back, or a customer in the toilet, but Case would have gambled there wasn't. That it was just him and the cashier now. But it didn't matter. Even if he considered it fifteen minutes ago, it was out of the question now. The hillbilly with the kid had looked long and hard at Case. The kid, too. They'd remember if it came to that. So Case's mind worked, just out of habit.

Hitting convenience stores was behind him now, or below him, not beyond him, but definitely behind him. That's what Case told himself, anyway.

It was like he was trying to remember me for later. Or as if I were somehow just as familiar to him as he was to me.

As if he'd seen a thousand guys like me, too...

A fellow alumni, maybe? Case shook the idea from his head. Paranoia—that's what it was and that was something he didn't need at the moment. Well, not in any excess quantity, anyway. In general, it was a fair hypothesis that what had kept Case alive up to now was paranoia. Case could easily believe it when the shrink told him he suffered from a persecution complex. Of course, Schonemann hadn't actually called it a "persecution complex," not in so many words, but that's what it amounted to when you took away all the fancy, tactful, \$200-an-hour gobbledygook. Case had participated in the program because they told him the parole board would consider shaving time off the back-end of his sentence if he did. Good behavior, rehabilitation. So Case emoted, revealed, remembered, let his "emotional armor" down—or pretended, too, anyway. Because like any good sociopath, he knew that what people wanted to hear was what they expected to hear, with just enough of an original twist to

keep it “real.” Inside, though, where it counted, he remained armed and dangerous.

And very afraid.

Easy for that loafer-wearing egghead to say that Case had a persecution complex as he sat there theorizing about “the criminal mind” for his latest bestseller, backed by his Ivy League credentials, his homes in Manhattan and Montana, his relationship with the Dalai Lama, and his jet-setting private practice as a “spiritual counselor” to movie stars and celebrity criminals. Easy for him to say with his connections, with his wealth, with the police paid to protect him and his property. But Case, and people like him, lived in a different world—a world where someone really was out to get you, where they’d take everything from you in a heartbeat, including your heartbeat, and there wasn’t a damn person anywhere you could complain to about it.

It was the world that most people only saw dramatized on TV. Or in books. Or in movies. Or in the newspapers. But it was the world we all lived in at one remove or another.

The world where the owl swoops down and carries off the mouse just because.

Where the spider catches what can’t fly through the net.

Where the weak don’t matter because the weak don’t count.

Not for long, anyway.

That girl, for instance. There was something about that girl that didn’t count. Whether Case realized it or not, she was the reason he’d gone to the window. It wasn’t the bastard who’d eye-fucked him in the aisle. She was the reason. The reason why he was still standing at the window watching the hanging exhaust of the minivan twist and

vanish into the night. Something about the way the girl stood there in her ill-fitting clothes, watching him from the end of the snack food aisle, like a memory that wouldn't fade away.

She was still there.

Haunting him.

On the verge of saying something she would never say. That she was waiting for him to guess, maybe. What?

Case remembered the folded paper he'd picked up. The note she'd left for him propped on the shiny bag of cheese puffs. She must have written it before she'd even entered the convenience store. She must have had it ready. Just in case she got the chance to give it to someone.

Anyone.

And that anyone happened to be him.

Case unfolded the tight, grimy triangle of paper. It was the torn corner of a page: thin, yellow, printed with cheap black ink. The Yellow Pages. The creases were black with gunk and lint and in danger of tearing. It looked as if the message had been carried for a long time, held in a small sweaty palm, folded and re-folded to make certain the message was just right.

That it got the point across.

So that maybe someone would get it. Someone might answer...

Case didn't really want to see what was written on the paper. Somehow he knew it wasn't going to be good. He had the feeling that whatever was written on the paper was an invitation to a whole

lot of hurt. A long detour of troubled road to a place he didn't want to visit.

He looked anyway. It was like the fortune in the fortune cookie. How could you not look?

There were only four words written on the page. The words were smudged and looked like they were written with charcoal. Only later did it occur to Case what the kid had really used to write them: eyeliner pencil.

The message was big and simple and easy enough to read.

HELP US GOD PLEASE

3.

Paradise, that's what some joker named this dump. You couldn't say much for his sense of humor.

A bed. A table. A desk. A mirror. Lots of fake wood. A soupy seascape over the bed. Or maybe it was a wheatfield. Christ, it might have been a pastel-colored puke. Frame it in brushed aluminum, it really didn't matter.

A motel, in other words, just like a thousand others. A place to lie down, hide, pass safely into a temporary, all too temporary, oblivion.

The desk clerk was appropriately disinterested. Barely gave Case a glance. You couldn't ask for more. He'd seen a thousand just

like Case. Didn't need to look up and trouble himself to see one more. Besides, the camera was watching for him. Cameras here, too, even in Paradise. Cameras all over, recording everything; there wasn't a place you could go, a thing you could do anymore, that wasn't on film somewhere waiting for someone to care enough to watch it. Most of the time, no one did.

A thousand rooms for a thousand guys like Case. Hard to believe, but true.

Truly horrifying.

Case shook his head. Sadly? No, not quite. He unscrewed the bottle of Jim Beam. He took a pull while ripping off the cellophane on a plastic cup he found on the formica desk/shelf outside the bathroom. Poured himself a proper cocktail. He was sure he could scare up a local bar or two but tonight wasn't a night for social drinking. He walked back to the bed. Sat on the side of it.

Hmm.

Enriched wheat flour, corn syrup, dextrose, TBHQ for freshness, xanthum gum, red #40, blue #1, all of it coming in at two hundred. That was a cherry pop tart, for you. Case ate it while sitting there on the edge of the bed, the wrapper on the floor by his feet. When he finished it, he opened up another. Four hundred calories. Sipped the Jim Beam. Fine dining on the road.

Ha ha.

One cheek full, chewing, he yanked open the drawer of the bedside table, more or less just for something to do, to have something new to look at. To confirm something. Sure enough, there it was, tucked in the corner of the empty drawer, just like always. The Holy Bible. Was it a law? A joke that they put it there? Some kind of hotel tradition that no one meant literally, like saying break a leg in

the theater? Ah, the little verities. When there weren't any big ones, you had to appreciate the smaller.

Case refilled his plastic cup. Glug-a-lug. He opened the Bible up on his lap, thumbed pages to Ecclesiastes, brushed away some pop tart crumbs. A living dog is better than a dead lion. That was wisdom, that was the real stuff. Case had seen plenty of dead lions in his time. He was better than all of them, right this moment, believe it or not, eating his cherry pop tart in a dank motel room in the middle of nowhere. What dead man wouldn't envy him, even this? Cause even if you're remembered, Case considered, chewing, a dead lion lives on only in the memory of dogs.

Enough philosophy.

Case brushed the rest of the crumbs off his lap, returned the Bible to its corner of the drawer where it would probably sit for another twenty-five years unnoticed, and took off his shoes and socks. Swung his legs up on the bed. These kinds of rooms were the same everywhere, so nearly identical you'd almost think you were somewhere like home; it was just the superficial resemblance, of course, but the surface was enough. You didn't put down roots in a life lived in rooms like these, but it felt familiar, comforting, as much as anything can be. Case propped himself up on a couple of cold flat pillows and reached for the remote. The TV came on with an electrical snap. Satisfying, that snap of connection.

The weather across America, none of it looking especially good. Blizzards here, nor-easters there, cyclones somewhere else. Cold fronts, coastal floodings, icy conditions, trials and tribulations everywhere, signs and significations, it was good, all in all, Case thought, lighting up, his third and last of the day, to be in Paradise.

Thumbing the remote, changing realities. This far out, deep in the belly of the red states, it didn't make the news, probably would be just a nostalgic reminder of the good ole days, even if it did. Maybe it

would earn a non-committal shake of the head, from the more enlightened of the yokels, the local Erasmus, just for show, if that. Lip-service aside, everyone knew the score. Everyone could feel that black tide rising. One less no-good nigger, that would be the unspoken truth, the underlying reality of the situation.

61 shots.

Trigger-happy cops. Not evil. Not a racist hit-squad like the minister is shouting, hoarse, in rhyme and unreason, for the cameras, that pompous, pampered, be-pompadoured asshole. Probably scared shitless is more like it. Who wouldn't be? You pull over a throbbing car with blacked-out windows in the dead of night, the plates of some badass wanted multiple-times for armed robbery, drug-related arrests, assault going back to when he was nine-years-old. Sealed records. Half the bad shit this dude done no one would ever know about. Born in poverty, raised in violence, six-foot-five, 320 pounds, a street nick something like Bloodbeast or Maniacman, a gangbanger from the darkest corner of the darkhood from way back when, and meanwhile you grew up shooting basketballs in the driveway of a split-level house somewhere out in Lilysville. Worst thing you ever did was break some windows out of the school gymnasium, lifted a couple of six-packs of beer from the local minimart, got stopped on a DUI joyriding in the Lexus of some friend's mom. Out of your element, scared? You're A-fucking right you are. You'd be a fool not to be. You weren't trained for the kind of animal you'd meet on those streets. No one could be trained for that.

But 61 shots? Did they really need that many to kill off one goddamn nigger?

Christ, 61 shots would have made a martyr out of anyone. Genghis Khan, probably. Frankenstein.

Case listened to farm reports, livestock reports, stories about fairs and craft shows, more weather reports, all of the news tied into

the weather somehow. Out here, the weather was far more important than anywhere else. Out here, the sky still mattered. Case ran through the channels, the whole spectrum of realities being broadcast. He thumbed the mute button and watched the heads talking in silence. It was more interesting that way, making up the dialogue coming out of their mouths. Well, Jim, it may be raining in Kansas but I'd really like a hot wet seven inches up the poop chute right about now. Okay, Diane, but first, let me finish masturbating to this story about the starving millions in Chad. The commercials were best, no sophomoric commentary was needed. All the wild gesticulations and exaggerated expressions to sell a bar of soap or a hemorrhoid cream were surreal enough.

Case would leave the Paradise in the morning. Get back on the road. Keep moving. But first he needed a good night's sleep. How long had it been since he'd had one of those? Two weeks? Three? He didn't sleep much anymore as it was, didn't need much sleep, viewed it with suspicion, like you would a woman you didn't quite trust, but that you still somehow couldn't do completely without, so you laid down beside her with one eye open. Case was human, after all, in a manner of speaking, of course.

He turned off the TV and heaved himself off the bed. Grabbed his overnight bag and carried it into the bathroom. He brushed his teeth at the sink. Stared at himself in the mirror without curiosity but without belief. Swallowed two Remerol tablets. Pissed in the toilet. Turned off the light.

The bedroom was lit by the pinkish glare of the motel's neon sign. Case had requested a first-floor room. Around the back. His car parked right outside the door.

He stripped off his clothes down to his underwear and laid back on the bed. Oblivion was always a relief. Case, such as he was, didn't have to worry about dreams. He never dreamt. He was aware of the theory that all men dreamt and those that claimed they didn't

simply didn't remember their dreams. But Case knew differently. He didn't dream. Period. If he did, he would have remembered. And if he remembered, he would have found life unbearable.

He laid there in the darkness, waiting.

Even emptied out as he was, sleep was as elusive as ever, demanded to be seduced. Case waited for the drug to take effect the way you'd wait for a mugger. When it came it clobbered his consciousness into submission.