

**JOE
HILL**



A STORY

**DARK
CAROUSEL**

LOOK FOR JOE HILL'S NEW COLLECTION,
FULL THROTTLE, COMING SOON

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Joe Hill



WILLIAM MORROW

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Dark Carousel

It used to be on postcards: the carousel at the end of the Cape Maggie Pier. It was called the Wild Wheel, and it ran fast—not as fast as a roller coaster but quite a bit faster than the usual carousel for kiddies. The Wheel looked like an immense cupcake, its cupola roof striped in black and green with royal gold trim. After dark it was a jewel box awash in an infernal red glow, like the light inside an oven. Wurlitzer music floated up and down the beach, discordant strains that sounded like a Romanian waltz, something for a nineteenth-century ball attended by Dracula and his icy white brides.

It was the most striking feature of Cape Maggie's run-down, seedy harbor walk. The harbor walk had been run-down and seedy since my grandparents were kids. The air was redolent with the cloying perfume of cotton candy, an odor that doesn't exist in nature and can only be described as "pink" smell. There was always a puddle of vomit on the boardwalk that had to be avoided. There were always soggy bits of popcorn floating in the puke. There were a dozen sit-down restaurants where you could pay too much for fried clams and wait too long to get them. There were always harassed-looking, sunburned grown-ups carrying shrieking, sunburned children, the whole family out for a seaside lark.

On the pier itself, there were the usual stands selling candied apples and hot dogs, booths where you could shoot an air rifle at tin outlaws who popped up from behind tin cacti. There was a great pirate ship that swung back and forth like a pendulum, sailing high out over the sides of the pier and the ocean beyond, while shrill screams carried into the night. I thought of that ride as the SS *Fuck No*. And there was a bouncy house called Bertha's Bounce. The entrance was the face of an obscenely fat woman with glaring eyes and glistening red cheeks. You took your shoes off outside and climbed in over her lolling tongue, between bloated lips. That was where the trouble started, and it was Geri Renshaw and I who started it. After all, there wasn't any rule that big kids, or even teenagers, couldn't play in the bouncy house. If you had a ticket, you could have your three minutes to leap around—and Geri said she wanted to see if it was as much fun as she remembered.

We went in with five little kids, and the music started, a recording of small children with piping voices, singing a highly sanitized version of "Jump Around" by House of Pain. Geri took my hands, and we jumped up and down, bounding about like astronauts on the moon. We lurched this way and that until we crashed into a wall and she pulled me down. When she rolled on top and began to bounce on *me*, she was just goofing, but the gray-haired woman who'd taken our tickets was watching, and she shouted, "NONE OF THAT!" at the top of her lungs and snapped her fingers at us. "OUT! This is a family ride."

"Got that right," Geri said, leaning over me, her breath warm in my face and pink-scented. She had just inhaled a cloud of cotton candy. She was in a tight, striped halter top that left her tanned midriff bare. Her breasts were right in my face in a very lovely way. "This is the kind of ride that makes families, if you don't use protection."

I laughed—I couldn't help it—even though I was embarrassed and my face was burning. Geri was like that.

Geri and her brother Jake were always dragging me into situations that excited and discomfited me in equal measure. They led me into things that I regretted in the moment but were later a pleasure to remember. Real sin, I think, produces the same emotions, in the exact opposite order.

As we exited, the ticket collector stared at us the way a person might look at a snake eating a rat, or two beetles fucking.

"Keep your pants on, Bertha," Geri said. "We did."

I grinned like an idiot but still felt bad. Geri and Jake Renshaw would take shit from no man, and no woman either. They relished verbally swatting down the ignorant and the self-righteous: the twerp, the bully, and the Baptist all the same.

Jake was waiting with an arm around Nancy Fairmont's waist when we came reeling across the pier. He had a wax cup of beer in the other hand, and he gave it to me as I walked up. God, it was *good*. That right there might've been the best beer of my life. Salty and cold, the sides of the cup beaded with ice water, and the flavor mixed with the briny tang of the sea air.

It was the tail end of August in 1994, and all of us were eighteen and free, although Jake could've easily passed for almost thirty. To look at Nancy, it was hard to believe she was dating Jake Renshaw, who with his flattop cut and his tattoos looked like trouble (and sometimes was). But then it was hard to picture a kid like me with Geri. Geri and Jake were twins and six feet tall to the inch—which meant they both had two inches on me, something that always bothered me when I had to rise on my toes to give Geri a kiss. They were strong, lean, limber, and blond, and they grew up jumping dirt bikes and doing after-school detentions. Jake had a criminal record. The only reason Geri didn't have one as well, Jake insisted, was that she'd never been caught.

Nancy, on the other hand, wore glasses with lenses as big as tea saucers and went everywhere with a book clutched to her flat chest. Her father was a veterinarian, her mother a librarian. As for me, Paul Whitestone, I longed to have a tattoo and a criminal record of my own, but instead I had an acceptance letter from Dartmouth and a notebook full of one-act plays.

Jake, Geri, and I had made the run to Cape Maggie in Jake Renshaw's 1982 Corvette, a car as sleek as a cruise missile and almost as fast. It was a two-seater, and no one would let us ride in it today the way we did then: Geri in my lap, Jake behind the wheel, and a six-pack of beer behind the stick shift—which we polished off while we were en route. We had come down from Lewiston to meet Nancy, who'd worked on the pier all summer long, selling fried dough. When she finished her shift, the four of us were going to drive nine miles to my parents' summer cottage on Maggie Pond. My parents were home in Lewiston, and we'd have the place to ourselves. It seemed like a good spot to make our final stand against adulthood.

Maybe I felt guilty about offending the ticket lady at Big Bertha, but Nancy was there to clear my conscience. She touched her glasses and said, "Mrs. Gish over there pickets Planned Parenthood every Sunday, with faked-up pictures of dead babies. Which is pretty funny, since her husband owns half the booths on the pier, including Funhouse Funnel Cakes, where I work, and he's tried to cop a feel on just about every girl who ever worked for him."

"Does he, now?" Jake asked. He was grinning, but there was a slow, sly chill in his voice that I knew from experience was a warning that we were wading into dangerous territory.

"Never mind, Jake," Nancy said, and she kissed his cheek. "He only paws high-school girls. I'm too old for him now."

“You ought to point him out sometime,” Jake said, and he looked this way and that along the pier, as if scouting for the guy right then and there.

Nancy put her hand on his chin and forcibly turned his head to look at her. “You mean I ought to ruin our night by letting you get arrested and kicked out of the service?” He laughed at her, but suddenly she was cross with him. “You dick around, Jake, and you could do five years. The only reason you aren’t there already is the marines took you—I guess because our nation’s military-industrial complex can always use more cannon fodder. It’s not your job to get even with every creep who ever wandered down the harbor walk.”

“It’s not your job to make sure I get out of Maine,” Jake said, his tone almost mild. “And if I wind up in the state prison, at least I’d get to see you on the weekends.”

“I wouldn’t visit you,” she said.

“Yes you would,” he told her, kissing her cheek, and she blushed and looked upset, and we all knew she would. It was embarrassing how tightly she was wrapped around Jake’s finger, how badly she wanted to make him happy. I understood exactly how she felt, because I was stuck on Geri just the same way.

Six months before, we had all gone bowling at Lewiston Lanes, something to do to kill a Thursday night. A drunk in the next lane made an obscene moan of appreciation when Geri bent over to get a ball, noisily admiring her rear in her tight jeans. Nancy told him not to be vile, and he replied that she didn’t need to worry, no one was going to bother checking out a no-tits cunt like herself. Jake had gently kissed Nancy on the top of her head and then, before she could grab his wrist and pull him back, decked the guy hard enough to shatter his nose and knock him flat.

The only problem was that the drunk and his buddies were all off-duty cops, and in the fracas that followed, Jake was wrestled to the floor and handcuffed, a snub-nosed

revolver put to his head. In the trial much was made of the fact that he had a switchblade in his pocket and a prior record of petty vandalism. The drunk—who in court was no longer a drunk but instead a good-looking officer of the law with a wife and four kids—insisted he had called Nancy a “little runt,” not a “no-tits cunt.” But it hardly mattered what he’d said, because the judge felt that both girls had been provocative in dress and behavior and so presumably had no right to be outraged by a little ribald commentary. The judge told Jake it was jail or military service, and two days later Jake was on his way to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, his head shaved and everything he owned stuffed into a Nike gym bag.

Now he was back for ten days on leave. The week after next, he’d board a plane at Bangor International Airport and fly to Germany for deployment in Berlin. I wouldn’t be there to see him go—by then I’d be moved into my dorm in New Hampshire. Nan was on her way elsewhere as well. After Labor Day she started classes at U of Maine in Orono. Only Geri was going nowhere, staying behind in Lewiston, where she had a job with housekeeping at a Days Inn. Jake had committed the assault, but it often seemed to me that somehow Geri was the one who’d received the prison sentence.

Nan was on break, still had a few hours on her shift to go before she was free. She wanted to blow the smell of fried grease from her hair, so we wandered out toward the end of the pier. A salty, scouring wind sang among the guy wires, snapped the pennants. The wind was blowing hard inland, too, coming in gusts that ripped off hats and slammed doors. Back on shore that wind felt like summer, sultry and sweet with the smell of baked grass and hot tarmac. Out on the end of the pier, the gusts carried a thrilling chill that made your pulse race. Out on the end of the pier, you were in October Country.

We slowed as we approached the Wild Wheel, which had just stopped turning. Geri tugged my hand and pointed at one of the creatures on the carousel. It was a black cat the size of a pony, with a limp mouse in its jaws. The cat's head was turned slightly, so it seemed to be watching us avidly with its bright green glass eyes.

"Oh, hey," Geri said. "That one looks just like me on my first date with Paul."

Nancy clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. Geri didn't need to say which of us was the mouse and which was the cat. Nancy had a lovely, helpless laugh that went through her whole tiny frame, doubled her over, and turned her face pink.

"Come on," Geri said. "Let's find our spirit animals." And she let go of my hand and took Nancy's.

The Wurlitzer began to play, a theatrical, whimsical, but also curiously dirgelike melody. Wandering amid the steeds, I looked at the creatures of the Wheel with a mix of fascination and repulsion. It seemed to me a uniquely disquieting collection of grotesqueries. There was a wolf as big as a bicycle, its sculpted, glossy fur a tangled mess of blacks and grays and its eyes as yellow as my beer. One paw was lifted slightly, and its pad was crimson, as if he had trod in blood. A sea serpent uncoiled itself across the outer edge of the carousel, a scaly rope as thick as a tree trunk. It had a shaggy gold mane and a gaping red mouth lined with black fangs. When I leaned in close, I discovered they were real: a mismatched set of shark's teeth, black with age. I walked through a team of white horses, frozen in the act of lunging, tendons straining in their necks, their mouths open as if to scream in anguish or rage. White horses with white eyes, like classical statuary.

"Where the hell you think they got these horses from? Satan's Circus Supplies? Lookat," Jake said, and he gestured at the mouth of one of the horses. It had the black, forked tongue of a snake, lolling out of its mouth.

“They come from Nacogdoches, Texas,” came a voice from down on the pier. “They’re over a century old. They were salvaged from Cooger’s Carousel of Ten Thousand Lights, after a fire burned Cooger’s Fun Park to the ground. You can see how that one there was scorched.”

The ride operator stood at a control board, to one side of the steps leading up to the merry-go-round. He wore a dress uniform, as if he were an ancient bellboy in some grand Eastern European hotel, a place where aristocrats went to summer with their families. His suit jacket was of green velvet, with two rows of brass buttons down the front and golden epaulets on his shoulders.

He put down a steel thermos and pointed at a horse whose face was blistered on one side, toasted a golden brown, like a marshmallow. The operator’s upper lip lifted in a curiously repulsive grin. He had red, plump, vaguely indecent lips, like a young Mick Jagger—unsettling in such an old, shriveled face. “They screamed.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The horses,” he said. “When the carousel began to burn. A dozen witnesses heard them. They screamed like girls.”

My arms prickled with goose bumps. It was a delightfully macabre claim to make.

“I heard they’re all salvaged,” Nancy said, from somewhere just behind me. She and Geri had circumnavigated the entirety of the carousel, examining the steeds, and were only now returning to us. “There was a piece in the *Portland Press Herald* last year.”

“The griffin came from Selznick’s in Hungary,” said the operator, “after they went bankrupt. The cat was a gift from Manx, who runs Christmasland in Colorado. The sea serpent was carved by Frederick Savage himself, who constructed the most famous carousel of them all, the Golden Gallopers on Brighton Palace Pier, after which the Wild Wheel is modeled. You’re one of Mr. Gish’s girls, aren’t you?”

“Ye-e-sss,” said Nancy slowly, perhaps because she didn’t quite like the operator’s phrasing, the way he called her “one of Mr. Gish’s girls.” “I work for him at the funnel-cake stand.”

“Only the best for Mr. Gish’s girls,” said the operator. “Would you like to ride a horse that once carried Judy Garland?”

He stepped up onto the carousel and offered Nancy his hand, which she took without hesitation, as if he were a desirable young man asking her to dance and not a creepy old dude with fat, damp lips. He led her to the first in the herd of six horses, and when she put a foot into one golden stirrup, he braced her waist to help her up.

“Judy visited Cooger’s in 1940, when she was on an extended tour to support *The Wizard of Oz*. She received a key to the city, sang ‘Over the Rainbow’ to an adoring crowd, and then rode the Ten Thousand Lights. There’s a photo of her in my private office, riding this very horse. There you go, right up. Aren’t you lovely?”

“What a crock of shit,” Geri said to me as she took my arm. She spoke in a low voice, but not low enough, and I saw the operator twitch. Geri threw her leg over the black cat. “Did anyone famous ride this one?”

“Not yet. But maybe someday you yourself will be a great celebrity! And then for years to come we will be boasting about the day when,” the old fellow told her in an exuberant tone. Then he caught my eye and winked and said, “You’ll want to drain that beer, son. No drinks on the ride. And alcohol is hardly necessary—the Wild Wheel will provide all the intoxication you could wish for.”

I had finished off two cans of the beer in the car on the ride down. My mostly full wax cup was my third. I could’ve put it down on the planks, but that casual suggestion—*You’ll want to drain that beer, son*—seemed like the only sensible thing to do. I swallowed most of a pint in five big swallows, and by the time I crushed the cup and tossed it

away into the night, the carousel was already beginning to turn.

I shivered. The beer was so cold I could feel it in my blood. A wave of dizziness rolled over me, and I reached for the closest mount, the big sea serpent with the black teeth. I got a leg over it just as it began to float upward on its rod. Jake hauled himself onto a horse beside Nancy, and Geri laid her head against her cat's neck and purred to it.

We were carried out of sight of the shore and onto the very tip of the pier, where to my left was black sky and blacker sea, roughened with whitecaps. The Wild Wheel accelerated into the bracing, salty air. Waves crashed. I shut my eyes but then had to open them again, right away. For an instant I felt as if I were diving down into the water on my sea serpent. For an instant I felt like I was drowning.

We went round, and I caught a flash of the operator, holding his thermos. When he'd been talking to us, he'd been all smiles. But in that brief glimpse I caught after we started to move, I saw a dead face, expressionless, his eyelids sagging heavily, that swollen mouth compressed into a frown. I thought I saw him digging for something in his pocket—a momentary observation that would end lives before the night was done.

The Wheel went around again and again, faster each time, unspooling its lunatic song into the night as if it were a record on a turntable. By the fourth circuit, I was surprised at how fast we were moving. I could feel the centrifugal force as a sense of weight, right between my eyebrows, and a tugging sensation in my uncomfortably full stomach. I needed to piss. I tried to tell myself I was having a good time, but I'd had too much beer. The bright flecks of the stars whipped past. The sounds of the pier came at us in bursts and were snatched away. I opened my eyes in time to see Jake and Nancy leaning toward each other, across the space between their horses, for a tender if clumsy kiss. Nan laughed, stroking the muscled neck of her

ride. Geri remained pressed flat against her giant cat and looked back at me with sleepy, knowing eyes.

The cat turned its head to look back at me, too, and I shut my eyes and shuddered and looked again, and of course it wasn't staring at me.

Our rides rushed us on into the night, rushed us into the darkness in a kind of mad fury, round and round and round, but in the end none of us went anywhere.

For the next three hours, the wind blew us up and down the harbor walk, while Nancy completed her shift. I had already had too much beer and knew it and drank more anyway. When a gust got behind me, it felt dangerously close to swooping me off the ground, as if I were as light as newspaper.

Jake and I banged away at pinball in Mordor's Marvelous Machines for a while. Afterward Geri and I had a walk on the beach that started out romantic—teenage lovers holding hands, looking at the stars—and predictably devolved into our usual giddy game of roughhouse. Geri wound up dragging me by both hands into the water. I staggered in up to my knees and came out with my sneakers squishing, the legs of my jeans soaked and caked in sand. Geri, on the other hand, was wearing flip-flops and had thoughtfully rolled up the cuffs of her Levi's and made it out breathless with laughter and largely unscathed. I warmed myself back up with a pair of hot dogs smothered in bacon and cheese.

At ten-thirty the bars were so full the crowds spilled onto the boardwalk. The road along the harbor was jammed bumper to bumper, and the night resounded with happy shouts and honking horns. But almost everything else around the pier was closing down or already shut. The Bouncy House and the SS *Fuck No* had gone dark an hour before.

By then I was staggering with beer and fairground chow and feeling the first nervous clench of nausea. I was beginning to think that by the time I got Geri to bed, I'd be too tired or maybe too sick to report for action.

Funhouse Funnel Cakes was at the foot of the pier, and when we got there, the electric sign over the order window had been shut off. Nancy used a rag to sweep the cinnamon and powdered sugar from the dented counter, said good night to the girl who'd been working the stand with her, and let herself out the side door and into Jake's arms. She stood on her toes for a lingering kiss, her book under one arm: *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy.

"Want to get another six on our way out of town?" Jake asked me over her shoulder.

The thought turned my stomach, so naturally I said, "We better."

"I'll pay," Nancy said, and led the way to the curb, just about skipping to be free and with her guy, to be eighteen and in love, on a night where it was still seventy degrees at nearly 11:00 P.M. The wind crazed her curly hair, blowing it around her face like seagrass.

We were waiting for a break in traffic when it all began to go wrong.

Nancy smacked herself on the butt—a provocative thing to do, a little out of character, but then she was in high spirits—and fumbled in a pocket for her cash. She frowned. She searched her other pockets. Then she searched them again.

"Shhhhhhooot . . ." she said. "I must've left my money at the stand."

She led us back to Funhouse Funnel Cakes. Her co-worker had shut off the last lights and locked up, but Nancy let herself in and pulled the dangling cord. A fluorescent tube came flickering on with a wasplike buzz. Nancy searched under the counters, checked her pockets again, and looked in her hardcover to see if she'd been

using her money as a bookmark. I saw her check the book myself. I'm sure of it.

"What the heck?" Nancy said. "I had a fifty-dollar bill. Fifty dollars! It was so new it looked like no one had ever spent it before. What the frickenfrack did I do with it?" She really did talk that way, like a brainy girl genius in a young-adult novel.

As she spoke, I flashed to a memory of the carousel operator helping her up onto a horse, his hand on her waist and a big smile on those juicy lips of his. Then I remembered catching a glimpse of him as we were spun past on our steeds. He hadn't been smiling then—and he'd been poking some fingers into his front pocket.

"Huh," I said aloud.

"What?" Jake asked.

I looked at Jake's narrow, handsome face, his set chin and mild eyes, and was struck with a sudden premonition of disaster. I shook my head, didn't want to say anything.

"Spill it," Jake said.

I knew better than to reply—but there's something irresistible about lighting a fuse and waiting for it to sizzle down to the charge, just to hear a loud bang. And there was always something exciting about winding up a Renshaw, for much the same reason. It was why I went into the bouncy house with Geri and why I decided to give Jake a straight answer.

"The operator on the carousel. He might've been putting something in his pocket after he helped Nan—"

I didn't get any further.

"That motherfucker," Jake said, and turned on his heel.

"Jake, no," Nancy said.

She grabbed his wrist, but he pulled free and started out along the dark pier.

"Jake!" Nancy called, but he didn't look back.

I trotted to keep up with him.

“Jake,” I said, my stomach queer with booze and nerves. “I didn’t see anything. Not really. He might’ve been reaching into his pocket to adjust his balls.”

“That motherfucker,” Jake repeated. “Had his hands all over her.”

The Wild Wheel was dark, its stampeding creatures frozen in midleap. A heavy red velvet rope had been hung across the steps, and the sign that dangled from it said SHH! THE HORSES ARE SLEEPING! DON’T DISTURB THEM!

At the center of the carousel was an inner ring lined with mirrored panels. A glow showed around one of those panels, and from somewhere on the other side you could hear swanky horns and a tinny, crooning voice: Pat Boone, “I Almost Lost My Mind.” Someone was at home in the secret cabinet at the heart of the Wild Wheel.

“Hey,” Jake said. “Hey, pal!”

“Jake! Forget it!” Nancy said. She was frightened now, scared of what Jake might do. “For all I know, I put my money down for a moment and the wind grabbed it.”

None of us believed that.

Geri was the first to step over the red velvet rope. If she was going, I had to follow, although by then I was scared, too. Scared and, if I’m honest, jittery with excitement. I didn’t know where this was heading, but I knew the Renshaw twins, and I knew they were getting Nancy’s fifty dollars back or getting even—or both.

We wove through the leaping horses. I didn’t like their faces in the dark, the way their mouths gaped as if to shriek, the way their eyes seemed to stare blindly at us with terror or rage or madness. Geri reached the mirrored panel with the light leaking out around its edges and rapped her fist against it. “Hey, are you—”

But no sooner had she touched the panel than it swung inward to reveal the little engine room at the center of the Wheel.

It was an octagonal space with walls of cheap plywood. The motor that drove the central pole might've been half a century old, a dull steel block shaped vaguely like a human heart, with a black rubber drive belt at one end. On the far side of the pole was a sorry little camp bed. I didn't see any photographs of Judy Garland, but the wall above the cot was papered in *Playboy* centerfolds.

The operator sat at a folding card table, in a ratty, curiously grand chair. It had curved wooden armrests and horsehair cushions. He was slumped over, using one arm as a pillow, and didn't react as we entered. Pat Boone pitied himself, tunefully, from a little transistor radio on the edge of the table.

I glanced at his face and flinched. His eyelids weren't fully shut, and I could see the slick, gray-tinted whites of his eyes. His fleshy red lips were wet with drool. The thermos was open nearby. The whole room reeked of motor oil and something else, a stink I couldn't quite identify.

Geri shoved his shoulder. "Hey, jack-off, my friend wants her money back."

His head lolled, but otherwise he didn't stir. Jake crowded into the room behind us, while Nancy stood outside among the horses.

Geri picked up his thermos, had a whiff, and poured it out on the floor. It was wine, a rosé, and it smelled like vinegar.

"He's pissed," she said. "Passed out drunk."

"Guys," I said. "Guys, is he— We sure he's even breathing?"

No one seemed to hear me. Jake pushed past Geri and began to dig around in one of the guy's front pockets. Then, abruptly, he recoiled, yanked his hand back as if he'd been stuck by a needle. At that moment I finally identified the rank odor that had only been partially masked by the aroma of WD-40.

"Pissed is right," Jake said. "Holy fucking shit, he's drenched. Christ, I got piss all over me."

Geri laughed. I didn't. The thought took me then that he was dead. Wasn't that what happened when your heart stopped? You lost control of your bladder?

Jake grimaced and went through the guy's pockets. He dug out a battered leather wallet and a knife with a yellowing ivory handle. Three scrimshaw horses charged across the grip.

"No," Nancy said, entering the room at last. She grabbed Jake's wrist. "Jake, you can't."

"What? I can't take back what he stole?" Jake flipped the wallet open and picked out two wrinkly twenties, all that was in there. He dropped the wallet on the floor.

"I had a *fifty*," Nancy told him. "Brand-new."

"Yeah, that fifty is in the cash register at the liquor store now. Ten bucks is just about exactly what it would've cost for another bottle. Anyway, what are you arguing about? Paul saw him pocket the money."

I hadn't, though. I was no longer sure I'd seen anything more than an old man with a weak bladder adjusting his junk. But I didn't say so, didn't want to argue. I wanted to make sure the old bastard was alive, and then I wanted to go, quickly, before he stirred or anyone else wandered by the carousel. Whatever grubby sense of delight there'd been in this expedition had fled when I caught a whiff of the operator and saw his gray face.

"Is he breathing?" I asked again, and again no one replied.

"Put it back. You'll get in trouble," Nancy said.

"You going to report me to the cops, buddy?" Jake asked the operator.

The operator didn't say anything.

"Didn't think so," Jake said. He turned and took Geri's arm and pushed her toward the door.

"We need to turn him on his side," Nancy said. Her voice was unhappy and shaky with nervousness. "If he's passed out drunk and he vomits, he could choke on it."

“Not our problem,” Jake said.

Geri said, “Nan, I bet he’s passed out this way a thousand times. If he hasn’t died yet, he probably won’t die tonight.”

“Paul!” Nancy cried, sounding almost hysterical.
“Please!”

My insides were knotted up, and I felt as jittery as if I had chugged a pot of coffee. I wanted to leave more than anything and can’t explain why I reached for the operator’s wrist instead, to search for his pulse.

“He’s not dead, asshole,” Jake said, but he waited nonetheless.

The operator’s pulse was there—raggedy and irregular but measurable. Close up he smelled bad, and not just of urine and booze. There was a cloying odor of caked, rotten blood.

“Paul,” Nancy said. “Put him on his bed. On his side.”

“Don’t do it,” Jake said.

I didn’t want to, but I didn’t think I could live with myself if I found myself reading his obituary in the weekend paper, not after we jacked him for forty bucks. I put my arms under his legs and behind his back and lifted him out of his chair.

I lumbered unsteadily to the camp cot and set him on it. A dark stain soaked the crotch of his green velvet pants, and the smell aggravated my already twitchy stomach. I rolled him onto his side and put a pillow under his head, the way you’re supposed to, so if he threw up, it wouldn’t go back down his windpipe. He snorted but didn’t look around. I circled the room, pulled the cord hanging from the ceiling to switch off the light. On the radio, the Gypsy was telling Pat Boone’s fortune. It wasn’t good.

I thought we were done, but when I came out, I found Geri getting her own revenge. She’d helped herself to the operator’s pocketknife, and she was carving a message into Judy Garland’s horse: FUCK YOU. It wasn’t poetry, but it made a point.

On the walk back to the boardwalk, Jake tried to hand the forty dollars to Nancy, but she wouldn't accept it. She was too angry with him. He stuck the bills in her pocket, and she took the twenties out and threw them on the pier. Jake had to chase them down before the wind could snatch them away and cast them to the darkness.

When we reached the road, the traffic was already tapering off, although the bars were still doing brisk business. Jake told Nancy he was going to get the car and asked if she would please buy the beer, because obviously they weren't going to have sex now and he was going to need more alcohol to drink away his blues.

This time she took the money. She tried not to smile but couldn't quite help herself. Even I could see that Jake was adorable when he made himself pathetic.

When we took off for my parents' summer cottage, I was in the passenger seat of the Corvette, with Geri on my lap and Nancy squeezed between my hip and the door. They all had bottles of Sam Adams, even Jake, who drove with one nestled between his thighs. I was the only one who wasn't drinking. I could still smell the operator on my hands, an odor that made me think of decay, of cancer. I didn't have the stomach for any more, and when Geri rolled down the window to chuck her bottle out into the night, I was glad for the fresh air. I heard her empty Sam Adams hit with a musical crunch.

We were careless, irresponsible people, but, in our defense, we didn't know it. I'm not at all sure I've made you see the times clearly. In 1994 those Mothers Against Drunk Driving ads were just background noise, and I had never heard of anyone getting a ticket for littering. None of us wore seat belts. It never even crossed my mind.

I'm not sure I have properly shown you Geri or Jake Renshaw either. I've tried to show you they were dangerous

—but they weren't immoral. Maybe they even had a stronger sense of morality than most, were more willing to act if they saw someone wronged. When the universe was out of whack, they felt obliged to put it back to rights, even if that meant defacing an antique horse or robbing a drunk. They were entirely indifferent to the consequences to themselves.

Nor were they thoughtless, unimaginative thugs. Nancy and I wouldn't have been with them if they were. Jake could throw knives and walk a tightrope. No one had taught him how to do those things. He just knew. In his last year of high school, after showing no interest in drama for his entire life up until then, he tried out for the Senior Shakespeare. Mr. Cuse cast him as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and damn it, he was *good*. He said his lines as if he'd been speaking in iambic pentameter all his life.

And Geri did voices. She could do Princess Di, and she could do Velma Dinkley. She could do an amazing Steven Tyler from Aerosmith; she could talk like him, sing like him, do his *acka-acka-acka-yow!*, and dance like him, whipping her hair from side to side, hands on her narrow waist.

I thought she was beautiful and gifted enough to be an actress. I said we should go to New York together after I finished college. I'd write plays, and she'd star in them. When I told her this, she laughed it off—and then gave me a look I didn't understand, not then. It was an emotion with which I was not familiar, a feeling no one had ever turned on me before then. I know now it was pity.

There was no moon, and the road grew darker the farther north we traveled. We followed a winding two-lane state highway through marsh and pines. For a while there were streetlights, spaced at quarter-mile intervals. Then there weren't. The wind had been strengthening all evening, and when the gusts blew, they shook the car and sent the cattails in the swamps into furious motion.

We were almost to the mile-and-a-half-long dirt track that led to my parents' cottage and the end of the evening when the Corvette swung around a horseshoe curve and Jake hit the brakes. Hard. The tires shrieked. The back end fishtailed.

"What the fuck is . . . ?" he shouted.

Nancy's face struck the dash and rebounded. Her hardcover, *All the Pretty Horses*, flew out of her hand. Geri went into the dash, but she rolled as she slid forward and caught it with her shoulder.

A dog looked at us—its green eyes flashed in the headlights—and then it slunk out of the road and lumbered into the trees. If it *was* a dog . . . and not a bear. It certainly looked big enough to be ursine rather than canine. We could hear it crashing through the brush for several seconds after it disappeared.

"Christ," Jake said. "Now *I'm* the one who looks like he pissed himself. I dumped my beer all over my—"

"Shut up," Geri said. "Nan, honey, are you okay?"

Nancy leaned back, her chin lifted, her eyes pointed at the ceiling of the car. She cupped her nose with one hand.

"I smached my node," she said.

Geri twisted around to stretch an arm into the rear of the car. "There's some rags in the back."

I contorted myself to reach past Geri's feet to collect Nancy's book. I grabbed *All the Pretty Horses*—then hesitated, my gaze caught by something else on the carpet. I plucked it off the floor.

Geri settled back into my lap, clutching a ratty Pink Floyd tee.

"Here, use this," she said.

"That's a good shirt," Jake said.

"That's your girlfriend's face, you prick."

"Fair point. Nan, you okay?"

She balled up the T-shirt and held it to her thin, delicate nose, dabbing at blood. With her other hand, she gave a

thumbs-up.

I said, "I got your book. Hey . . . um. This was on the floor with it."

I handed her the novel—and a crisp fifty-dollar bill, so clean and new-looking it might've been minted that morning.

Her eyes widened in horror around the bloodstained wad of shirt.

"Un-uh! No! *No!* I looked for it, and it wadn't there!"

"I know," I said. "I saw you look. You must've missed it."

Water quivered in Nancy's eyes, threatening to spill over.

"Hon," Geri said. "Nan. Come on. We all thought he stole your fifty. Honest mistake."

"We can tell that to the cops," I said. "If they show up asking whether we rolled a drunk on the pier. I bet they'll be very understanding."

Geri flashed a look like murder at me, and Nan began to cry, and I immediately regretted saying anything, regretted finding the money at all. I glanced anxiously at Jake—I was ready for an icy glare and some brotherly malice—but he was ignoring the three of us. He stared out the window, peering into the night.

"Anyone want to tell me what the fuck just walked across the road?" he asked.

"Dog, right?" I said, eager to change the subject.

"I didn't see," Geri said, "'cause I was trying not to eat a faceful of dash at the time."

"I never seen a dog like that," Jake said. "Thing was half the size of the car."

"Maybe it was a brown bear."

"Maybe it wad Sasquadge," Nancy said miserably.

We were all silent for a moment, letting that one land—and then we erupted into laughter. Nessie can hang it up. Cryptozoology never came up with a cuter beast than Sasquadge.

Two poles with reflective disks attached to them marked the one-lane dirt road that led to my parents' summer cottage, which sat on the estuarial pool known as Maggie Pond. Jake turned in and rolled down his window at the same time, letting in a warm slipstream of salty air that blew his hair back from his forehead.

The lane was cratered with potholes, some of them a foot deep and a yard across, and Jake had to slow to about ten miles an hour. Weeds hissed against the undercarriage. Rocks pinged.

We had gone a third of a mile when we saw the branch, a big oak bough across the road. Jake cursed, banged the car into park.

"I god it," Nancy said.

"You stay here," Jake said, but she was already throwing the passenger door open.

"I need to stredge my leds," she said, and tossed the bloody Floyd shirt on the floor of the car as she slammed the door.

We watched her walk into Jake's headlights: cute, fragile little thing in pink sneakers. She hunched at one end of the broken branch, where the splintered, reddish wood shone bright and clean, and she began to tug.

"She ain't gonna be able to move that alone," Jake said.

"She's got it," Geri told him.

"Go help her, Paul," Jake said to me. "It'll make up for you being such a douche a couple minutes ago."

"Oh, shit, man, I wasn't even thinking. . . . I didn't mean to . . ." I said, my head sinking between my shoulders under the weight of my shame.

Out in the road, Nancy managed to turn the eight-foot branch most of the way to one side. She went around to grab the other end, perhaps to try rolling it out of the road and into the ditch.

"Couldn't you just've stuck that fifty under the seat? Nan ain't gonna sleep tonight now. You know she's going to cry

her head off as soon as we're alone," Jake said. "And I'm going to be the one who has to deal with it—"

"What's that?" Geri said.

"—not you," Jake went on, as if she hadn't spoken. "You pulled your same old Paul Whitestone magic. You took a good evening, and abra-fuckin'-cadabra—"

"Do you *hear* that?" Geri asked again.

I *felt* it before I heard it. The car shook. I became aware of a sound like an approaching storm front, rain drumming heavily on the earth. It was like being parked alongside a railroad track as a freight train thundered past.

The first of the horses thundered past on the left, so close that one shoulder brushed the driver's-side mirror. Nancy looked up and let go of the branch and made a move like she was going to jump out of the road. She only had a moment, maybe a second or two, and she didn't get far. The horse rode her down, hooves flashing, and Nancy fell beneath them. She was prone in the road when the next horse went over her. I heard her spine crack. Or maybe that was the big tree branch, I don't know.

A third horse flashed past, and a fourth. The first three horses kept going, disappearing past the headlights, into the darkness. The fourth slowed close to Nancy's body. She'd been half dragged and half thrown almost thirty feet from the Corvette, right to the far edge of what the headlights could reveal. The tall white horse lowered its head and seemed to gum Nancy's hair, which was bloody and matted and twitching in the breeze.

Jake screamed. I think he was trying to scream Nancy's name but wasn't able to articulate words. Geri was screaming, too. I wasn't. I couldn't get the breath. I felt as if a horse had run over me also, stamped all the air out of me.

The horse that stood over Nancy had a mangled face, one side pink and flayed as the result of a long-ago burn. Both of its eyes were white, but the one on the ruined side of its

head bulged sickeningly from its socket. The tongue that slipped out and lapped Nancy's face wasn't a horse tongue at all. It was as thin and black as a serpent's.

Jake's hand clawed blindly for the latch. He was staring at Nancy, so he didn't see another horse standing alongside the car. None of us did. Jake's door sprang open, and he put his foot on the dirt, and I looked over and had just enough time to shout his name.

The horse alongside the car dipped its powerful neck and clamped its big horsey teeth on Jake's shoulder and snapped its head. Jake was lifted out of the car and hurled into the trunk of a red pine at the side of the road. He struck it as if he'd been fired from a cannon and dropped out of sight into the tangled underbrush.

Geri heaved herself from my lap and into the driver's seat. She grabbed for the door as if she were going to go after him. I got her by the shoulder and hauled her back. At the same moment, the big horse beside the car turned in a clumsy half circle. Its big white rump hit the door and banged it shut on her.

The next I saw Jake, he was pulling himself across the road, into the headlights. I think his back was broken, but I couldn't swear to it. His feet dragged in a useless sort of way behind him. He cast a wild look up at us—at me—and his gaze met mine. I wish it hadn't. I never wanted to see so much terror in anyone's face, so much senseless panic.

The white stallion trotted out after him, lifting its hooves high, as if it were on parade. It caught up to Jake and looked down upon him almost speculatively, then stomped on him, right between his shoulder blades. The force flattened Jake into the dirt. He tried to rise, and the stallion kicked him in the face. It crushed in most of his skull—nose, the ridge of bone above his eyes, a cheekbone—put a red gash right in the middle of his movie-star good looks. The destrier wasn't done with him. As Jake fell, it lowered its muzzle and bit the back of his Levi jacket, pulled him off

the ground, and flung him effortlessly into the trees, as if he were a scarecrow stuffed with straw.

Geri didn't know what to do, was fixed in place behind the wheel, her face stricken, her eyes wide. The driver's window was still down, and when the black dog hit the side of the Corvette, its shaggy head barreled right through. It put two paws on the inside of the window and sank its teeth into her left shoulder, tore the shirt from collar to sleeve, mauled the taut, tanned flesh beneath. Its hot breath stank.

She screamed. Her hand found the gearshift, and she launched the Corvette into motion.

The horse that had killed Jake was directly in front of us, and she smashed into it doing twenty miles an hour, cut its legs out from under it. The big horse had to weigh close to twelve hundred pounds, and the front end of the Corvette crumpled. I was slammed into the dash. The horse was thrown across the hood, rolled, legs flailing at the night, turned over, and kicked one hoof through the windshield. It struck Geri in the chest and drove her back into her seat. Safety glass erupted in a spray of chunky blue pebbles, rattled all over the cockpit.

Geri threw the car into reverse and accelerated backward. The big white horse rolled off the hood with a great tumbling crash that shook the roadbed. It hit the dirt lane and hauled itself back up onto its front legs. Its shattered rear legs trailed uselessly. Geri jammed the car into drive and went straight at it again.

The horse pulled itself out of the way, and we zipped past it, so close that its tail lashed my window. I think that was right around the time Geri drove over Nancy. I only saw Nan in front of the car for an instant before the Corvette thudded and lurched, passing over the obstruction in the road. An oily steam gushed from under the hood.

For one terrible moment, the black dog ran alongside us, its great red tongue lolling out of the side of its mouth. Then we left it behind.

“Geri!” I cried. “Roll up your window!”

“I can’t!” she said.

Her voice was thin with strain. Her shoulder had been clawed deep into the muscle, and the front of her shirt was soaked with blood. She drove one-handed.

I reached across her waist and turned the window crank, rolled the glass up for her. We hit a rut, hard, and the top of my skull banged into her jaw. Black pinwheels erupted and whirled and faded before my eyes.

“Slow down!” I yelled. “You’ll run us off the road!”

“Can’t slow down,” she said. “Behind us.”

I looked back through the rear window. They pelted after us, their hooves raising a low cloud of white chalk, five figures so pale they were like the ghosts of stallions.

Geri shut her eyes and sagged, lowering her chin almost to her breastbone. We nearly went off the road then, as the Corvette blasted into a hairpin turn. I grabbed the wheel myself and hauled on it, and it still didn’t look like we were going to make it. I screamed. That got her attention, drew her up out of her pain. She wrenched at the wheel. The Corvette slung around the corner so hard the back end swished out to one side, throwing rocks. Geri drew a ragged, whistling breath.

“What’s wrong?” I asked stupidly—like everything wasn’t wrong, like she hadn’t just seen her brother and her best friend trampled to death, like there wasn’t something impossible coming up behind us in a roar of pounding hooves.

“Can’t breathe,” she said, and I remembered the hoof coming through the windshield and slugging her in the chest. Broken ribs, had to be.

“We’ll get into the house. We’ll call for help.”

“Can’t breathe,” she repeated. “*Paul*. They’re off the merry-go-round. They’re after us because of what we did, aren’t they? That’s why they killed Jake. That’s why they killed Nancy.”

It was terrible to hear her say it. I knew it was true, had known from the moment I saw the horse with the burned face. The thought made my head go spinny and light. The thought made me feel like a drunk on a carousel, going around too fast, too hard. When I shut my eyes, it seemed to me I was dangerously close to being thrown right off the great turning wheel of the world.

"We're almost to the house."

"Paul," she said, and for the first time in all the years I'd known her, I saw Geri trying not to cry. "I think there's something broken in my chest. I think I'm smashed up good."

"Turn!" I cried.

The front left headlight had been smashed out, and even though I'd traveled the road to Maggie Pond a thousand times, in the darkness we almost missed the turn to my parents' place. She yanked the wheel, and the Corvette slued through its own smoke. We thudded down a steep gravel incline and swung in front of the house.

It was a two-story white cottage with green shutters and a big screened-in front porch. A single stone stoop led up to the screen door. Safety was eight feet away, on the far side of the porch, through the front door. They couldn't get us inside. I was pretty sure.

No sooner had we stopped than the horses surrounded the car, circling us, tails twitching, shoulders bumping the Corvette. Their hooves threw up dust and obscured our view of the porch.

Now that we were stopped, I could hear the thin, whistling wheeze Geri made each time she drew breath. She hunched forward, her brow touching the steering wheel, her hand to her breastbone.

"What do we do?" I asked. One of the horses swiped the car hard enough to send it jouncing up and down on its springs.

"Is it because we stole his money?" Geri asked, and drew another thin sip of air. "Or is it because I cut one of the horses?"

"Don't think about it. Let's think about how to get past them into the house."

She went on as if I hadn't spoken. "Or is it just because we needed killing? Is it because there's something wrong with us, Paul? Oh. Oh, my chest."

"Maybe we could turn around, try to get back to the highway," I said, although already I doubted we were going anywhere. Now that we were stopped, I wasn't sure we could get going again. The front end of the car looked like it had met a tree at high speed. The hood was mashed out of shape, and something under the crumpled lid was hissing steadily.

"I've got another idea," she said, and looked at me from behind tangles of her own hair. Her eyes were rueful and bright. "How about I get out of the car and run for the lake? That'll draw them away, and you can get into the house."

"What? No. Geri, *no*. The house is right here. No one else needs to die. The house is *right here*. There's no fucking way you're going to pull some kind of movie bullshit and try to lead them—"

"Maybe they don't want you, Paul," she said. Her chest heaved slowly and steadily, her T-shirt plastered red and wet to her skin. "*You* didn't do anything. *We* did. Maybe they'd let you go."

"What did Nancy do?" I cried.

"She drank the beer," Geri said, as if it were obvious. "We took the money, she spent it, and we all shared the beer—all except for you. Jake stole. I slashed up a horse. What did *you* do? You took the old guy and put him on his side so he wouldn't choke to death."

"You're aren't thinking right. You've lost all kinds of blood, and you saw Jake and Nan get trampled, and you're

in shock. They're *horses*. They can't want *revenge*."

"Of course they want revenge," she said. "But maybe not on you. Just listen. I'm too light-headed to argue with you. We have to do it now. I'm going to get out of the car and run to the left, first chance I see. I'll run for the trees and the lake. Maybe I can make it to the float. Horses can swim, but I don't think they could reach me up on the float, and even with my chest fucked up, I think I can paddle out there. When I go, you wait until they've rushed after me, and then you get inside and you call every cop in the state —"

"No," I said. "No."

"Besides," she told me, and one corner of her mouth lifted in a wry smile, "I can still cut a motherfucker."

And she opened her left hand to show me the carousel operator's knife. It rested in the center of her palm, so I could see the scrimshaw, that carving of stampeding horses.

"No," I said. I didn't know any other words. Language had abandoned me.

I reached for the knife, but she closed her fingers around it. I wound up only placing my hand on hers.

"I always thought that stuff about going to New York together was crap," she said. "The stuff about how I was going to be an actress and you were going to be a writer. I always thought it was impossible. But if I don't die, we should give it a shot. It can't be any more impossible than this."

Her hand slipped out of mine. Even now I don't know why I let her go.

A horse wheeled in front of the Corvette and jumped, and his front hooves landed on the hood. The car bounced up and down on its coils. The great white saddle horse glared at us, and his eyes were the color of smoke. A snake's tongue lapped at his wrinkled black gums. He sank onto his

haunches, ready to come right through the space where the windshield had been.

"Bye," Geri said, almost softly.

She was out of the car and on her feet and moving before I had time to turn my head.

She ran from the screened-in porch, past the back of the car, heading for the corner of the house and the pines. I could see the lake between the black silhouettes of the tree trunks, faintly luminescent in the night. It wasn't far to the water's edge. Twenty-five yards maybe.

The horse in front of me snapped its head around to watch her flight, then leaped away from the car and followed. Two other horses joined the chase, but Geri was fast, and the brush was close.

She had just made the edge of the woods when the cat vaulted from behind a chest-high screen of bushes. It was the size of a cougar and had paws as big as baseball gloves. One of them batted her hard enough to spin her halfway around. The cat came down on top of her with a strangled yowl that turned into a high-pitched animal scream. I like to think she got the knife into it. I liked to think Geri showed it she had claws of her own.

I ran. I don't remember getting out of the car. I was just out, on my feet, booking it around the ruined front end of the Corvette. I hit the screen door and threw it open and launched myself at the front door beyond. It was locked, of course. The key hung off a rusting nail to the right of the door. I grabbed for it and dropped it and snatched it up. I stabbed it at the lock again and again. I have dreams about that, still—that I am thrusting a key, with a shaking hand, at a lock I must open and which I keep impossibly missing, while something terrible rushes up behind me through the darkness: a horse, or a wolf, or Geri, the lower part of her face clawed off, her throat raked into ribbons. *Hey, babe, be honest: Do you really think I'm pretty enough to be in movies?*

In truth I was probably struggling with the lock for less than ten seconds. When the door opened, I went in so fast my feet caught on the jamb, and I hit the floor hard enough to drive the air out of me. I scrambled on all fours, shouting, making incoherent sobbing noises. I kicked the door shut behind me and curled on my side and wept. I shook as if I'd just been plunged through the ice into freezing water.

It was a minute or two before I brought myself under control and was able to stand. I made my way, shakily, to the door and peered through one of the sidelights.

Five horses watched from the driveway, gathered around the smashed wreck of the Corvette. They studied the house with their eyes of pale poison smoke. Farther up the road, I saw the dog pacing back and forth with a restless, muscular fury. I couldn't tell where the cat had gotten to—but I heard it. At some point in the hours that followed, I heard it yowling angrily in the distance.

I stared at the herd, and they stared back. One of them stood in profile to the house, half a ton of horse. The scars scrawled across his side looked like they might be a decade old, not a few hours, but for all that, they were quite distinct, in silver relief against his fine white hair. Hacked there in the horse's flesh were the words FUCK YOU.

They whinnied together, the pack of them. It sounded like laughter.

I staggered into the kitchen and tried the phone. There was no dial tone, no connection. The line was down. Maybe it was the work of the horses, the creatures that came off the Wild Wheel, but I think it was more likely just the wind. When it gusted liked that out along Maggie Pond, the phone and electric quite often cut out, and as it happened, I had neither that night.

I moved from window to window. The horses watched from the road. Other beasts crashed in the brush, circling the house. I screamed at them to go away. I screamed that I'd kill them, I'd kill all of them. I screamed that we didn't mean it, that none of us meant anything. Only that last bit was true, though, it seems to me now. None of us meant anything.

I passed out on the couch in the living room, and when I woke, to a bright morning—blue skies and every drop of dew glinting with sunlight—the creatures of the Wheel were gone. I didn't dare go out, though. I thought they might be hiding.

It was close on late afternoon when I finally risked the dirt road, and even then I walked with a big kitchen knife in one hand. A woman in a Land Rover rolled slowly by, raising a cloud of dust. I ran after her, screaming for help, and she sped away. Can you blame her?

A state police cruiser collected me fifteen minutes later, was waiting for me where the dirt road met the state highway. I spent three days at Central Maine Medical in Lewiston—not because I'd suffered any great physical injury but to remain under observation after suffering what a clinician described to my parents as a “serious paranoid break from reality.”

On the third day, with my parents and our family attorney at my bedside, I admitted to a cop named Follett that the four of us had dropped acid shortly before riding the Wild Wheel. Somewhere on the drive to Maggie Pond, we struck an animal, probably a moose, and Geri and Nan, who were riding without seat belts, were killed instantly. Follett asked who was driving, and the lawyer answered for me, said it had been Jake. I added, in a shaking voice, that I couldn't drive a stick, which was true.

The lawyer told the rest . . . that Jake had dumped the bodies in the lake and fled, probably for Canada, to avoid what almost certainly would've been a life sentence in jail.

Our family attorney added that I, too, was a victim—a victim of the drugs Jake had supplied and the wreck he had caused. All I did was nod and agree and sign what they asked me to sign. It was good enough for the cop. He remembered Jake well, had not forgotten the night Jake decked his buddy at Lewiston Lanes.

The Maine State Police and the Warden Service got out on Maggie Pond and dragged for bodies, but nothing was ever recovered. Maggie Pond is, after all, a tidal pool and opens to the sea.

I never went to Dartmouth. I couldn't even leave the house. To step outdoors was as hard for me as it would be to walk on a ledge ten stories above the ground.

It was a month before I looked out my bedroom window one evening and saw one of the horses watching the house from the road. It stood beneath a streetlamp, staring up at me with milky eyes, the left half of its face mottled and withered from ancient burns. After a moment it lowered its head and clopped slowly away.

Geri had thought maybe they didn't want me. Of course they wanted me. I was the one who fingered the carousel operator. I was the one who lit Jake's fuse.

I developed a terror of the night. I was awake at all hours, watching for them—and sometimes I saw them. A couple of the horses one night, the cat another. They were keeping an eye on me. They were waiting for me.

I was institutionalized for ten weeks in the spring of 1995. I got on lithium, and for a while the horses couldn't find me. For a while I was better. I had months of therapy. I began to take walks outside—at first just from the front door to the mailbox and then down the street. Eventually I could go for blocks without a care, as long as it was bright daylight. Dusk, though, still made me short of breath.

In the spring of 1996, with my parents' blessing and my therapist's endorsement, I flew to California and spent two months living with my aunt, crashing in her guest room. She was a bank teller and a devout, practicing, but not overbearing, Methodist, and I think my parents felt I would be safe enough with her. My mother was so proud of me for daring to travel. My father, I believe, was just relieved to get me out of the house, to have a break from my nervous fits and paranoia.

I got a job in a thrift shop. I went on dates. I felt safe and, sometimes, almost content. It was just like normal life. I began seeing an older woman, a preschool teacher who was going prematurely gray and who had a man's husky, rough laugh. One night we met for tea and coffee cake, and I lost track of time, and when we went out, the sky was glazed red with sunset and the dog was there. It had emerged from a nearby park and stood glaring at me, spit dripping from its open jaws. My date saw the dog, too, and gripped my wrist and said, "What the hell is that!" I wrenched my arm free and plunged back into the café, screaming for someone to call the police, screaming that I was going to die.

I had to go back to the hospital. Three months that time, and a cycle of electroshock therapy. While I was in, someone sent me a postcard of the Cape Maggie Pier and the Wild Wheel. There was no message on it, but then the postcard was the message.

I had never imagined that the creatures of the Wheel might follow me all the way across the country. It had taken them two months to catch up to me.

In the earliest part of this century, I was accepted to the University of London and flew to the United Kingdom to study urban planning. After I graduated, I stayed there.

I never did write a play, or even so much as a poem. My literary output has been limited to a few reports for technical journals about dealing with urban pests: pigeons, rats, raccoons. In the field I am sometimes half-jokingly called Mr. Murder. My specialty is developing strategies to wipe out any trace of the animal world from the chrome-and-glass order of the metropolis.

But Mr. Murder is not the kind of moniker that invites romantic interest, and my personal issues—panic attacks, a profound fear of the dark—have left me relatively isolated. I never married. I have no children. I have acquaintances, not friends. Friendships are made in the pub, after hours—and after hours I am safely home, behind a bolted door, in a third-floor apartment, with my books.

I have never seen the horses here. Rationally, I am certain that whatever their powers, they cannot cross three thousand miles of ocean to reach me. I am safe—from them.

Last year, though, I was sent to an urban-planning conference in Brighton. I was to give an afternoon presentation on the Japanese beetle and the dangers it presents to urban forestry. I didn't realize, until the taxi dropped me off, that the hotel was right across from Palace Pier, with its grand carousel turning out on the tip, the wind carrying the hurly-burly song of the Wurlitzer all up and down the beachfront. I delivered my talk in a conference room with a sick sweat prickling on my forehead and my stomach twisting, then all but fled the room the moment I finished. I could still hear the carousel music inside the hotel, its lunatic lullaby wafting through the imposing lobby. I couldn't go back to London—was scheduled for a panel the following morning—but I could get away from the hotel for a while, and I set out down the beach, until the pier was well behind me.

I had a burger and a pint and another pint, in a beachside place, to steady my nerves. I stayed too long, and when I

left and began to walk back toward the hotel along the beach, the sun was touching the horizon. I trekked across cold sand, the salty air snatching at my scarf and hair, going as fast as a man can without breaking into a sprint.

The hotel was in sight before I allowed myself to slow and catch my breath. I had a stitch in my side, and the insides of my lungs were full of icy, abrasive fire.

Something slapped and crashed in the water.

I only saw its tail for a moment, eight feet of it, a glistening black rope, thick as a telephone pole. Its head surfaced, gold and green, like painted armor, its eyes as bright and blind as coins, and then it went under again. I had not seen it in more than twenty years, but I knew the sea serpent of the Wild Wheel at first sight, recognized it in an instant.

They will never be done with me.

I made it back to my hotel room and promptly lost my burger and beer in the toilet. I was sick off and on all night with a chilly sweat and the shakes. I didn't sleep. I couldn't. Every time I shut my eyes, the room would begin to spin, circling in slow revolutions, like a record on a turntable, like a carousel beginning its circuit. Round and round and round I went, round and round, and from a long way off I could hear the music of the Golden Gallopers on the Brighton Palace Pier, the Wurlitzer playing its mad fox-trot to the night, while children screamed, whether with laughter or terror, I could not tell you.

These days it is all the same to me.

About the Author



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JOE HILL is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *The Fireman*, *NOS4A2*, *Horns*, and *Heart-Shaped Box*; *Strange Weather*, a collection of novellas; and the prize-winning story collection *20th Century Ghosts*. He is also the Eisner Award-winning writer of a six-volume comic book series, *Locke & Key*. Much of his work is being

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