

“James Newman has written a smashing dark debut that kept me turning pages right through to the THE END.”

—ED GORMAN

James Newman

MIDNIGHT RAIN

ADVANCE READING COPY

The world first edition of James Newman's debut novel
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Afterword by James Newman
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Praise for James Newman's MIDNIGHT RAIN

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The narrative is up close and personal, sharp and edgy.

It is a story that grabbed me from the outset, buried its teeth in deep, and would not let go. *Midnight Rain*, by James Newman, is easily one of the best books I've read in the last few years."

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(Author of *On A Pale Horse*, *Firefly*, the "Xanth" Series)



Foreword

Many writers are at their best when they deal with their youth.

I've never been sure why, other than the fact that it's probably the most dangerous time most of us live through. And danger has a vitality that no other feeling can quite equal. Pure stoned exhilaration frequently matched by pure stoned terror and pure stoned misery.

Youth is dangerous in all senses. The first heartbreak is never forgotten, and probably shapes us more than we realize or want to recognize. The experiments with liquor, drugs, and occasional violence may not only shape us but deform us forever. And looking back on a dangerous time of youth from a couple of decades out, you may find that you damaged not only yourself but others you didn't mean to hurt at all.

I say all this from the vantage point of age sixty-two. Several generations have passed through dangerous youth since I allegedly became an adult. The cars are faster now, the drugs more accessible, the liquor more prevalent, the lives maybe just a tad messier.

But not by much.

Faulkner said that the troubled heart is eternal, and so it is. Which is why I like this novel you're holding. Not just because its heart is troubled, but because the troubles are articulated so well. Yes, it has all the requisite spooks and twists and set-pieces you want in a horror novel, but more importantly it has its own quiet truths about a particular troubled youth in a particular troubled time.

I enjoyed it, and I think you will too.

Ed Gorman
February 2004

MIDNIGHT RAIN

Do you remember the exact moment your childhood ended?

I do.

For most of us, it is impossible to pinpoint that single *instant* when we became adults. We treasure the memories both perfect and bitter-sweet, reminisce on old friends and days gone by. We can't remember how it all ended—despite an infallible belief, once upon a time, that it never *could* end—but it did. Eventually.

We hold on to the memories leading up to that point as best we can. We pray they will never fade, because when they do the magic is gone. That's when we grow old.

Or go mad.

This is the way *my* childhood ended...

Not when I got my driver's license. Or the first time I tried marijuana.

Nor did it end with that initial teenage taste of sex—awkward groping up at Storch's Rim, my hometown's rendezvous point for young lovers with raging hormones and an indifference toward patrolling lawmen.

The day the North Carolina school system deemed me an adult with a fancy certificate and a clammy handshake from Principal Colin Maxwell meant little in regards to the death of *my* boyhood.

It was nothing so prosaic as all that, in a town called Midnight.

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It happened on August 5, 1977. One month after my twelfth birthday.

What I saw that night changed me, forever altered the way I look at other people and the masks they sometimes wear.

Do you remember the exact moment your childhood ended?

I do...

That was the night I witnessed the murder of a young lady named Cassandra Belle Rourke.

One

I remember wondering several times if it would ever stop raining, during those two dark weeks in '77.

Even when the booming thunder grew silent for a while, when the lightning did not illuminate my hometown every few seconds like brief glimpses of daylight after dusk, all my old haunts around Midnight, North Carolina, seemed doomed to bask in that gray chill forever.

It just kept *raining*.

The storm seemed destined to never end, as if one day my town might drown beneath it all, float belly-up and drift off to some other place far away...

After what happened, I almost wished it would.

“Danny. Hey, Dan, man... you awake?”

The sounds of blankets rustling, a bedspring squeaking. A groan from my big brother.

I shook him again, whispered his name with a tad more urgency. Part of me envied Dan as I watched him come to, coveted his ability to doze without images of death and violence filling his dreams. It didn't seem fair.

Of course, he hadn't seen the things I'd seen. He hadn't witnessed what I witnessed.

“D-Dan, wake up,” I said. My lower lip trembled as I tried my best not to cry.

I shook him again.

“Um-merzghl,” said Dan.

“Wake up. Please?”

I used to think Dan could sleep through a nuclear war (getting him awake was “like tryin' to shake the brown off shit,” Mom used to say, and that wasn't too far from the truth). There were times when I carried on lengthy conversations with him only to discover later that

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he'd been half-conscious the entire time and remembered not a word of them.

Finally he opened one eye, squinted up at me. "Kyle? What's going on?"

"I'm scared." It was all I could think of to say at first. My voice was thick with oncoming tears, my head filled with the lingering crimson images of the awful things I had seen earlier that night.

Dan yawned, sat up, squinted at the clock on his nightstand. "Jeez, man. It's two-thirty in the morning. You know I got that thing tomorrow."

"I know," I said. I sniffled, let out a frightened little moan in the darkness, and plopped down on the bed beside him. "I'm sorry."

A flicker of lightning outside Dan's window suddenly lit up the room, and my big brother resembled something malevolent looming before me. He was a black shape in the night for those next few seconds, a tall silhouette with its hand on my knee...but then the thunder that followed was weak, distant, and he was just my brother again.

Dan yawned again. He tossed the covers from atop his body and scooted closer toward me. "What's the matter, bro? You in some kind of trouble?"

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. *Oh, Dan...if you only knew...*

"Didn't ride your bike through old Ms. Mertz's flowerbed again, did you?"

"Huh-uh."

"Samantha Barrett caught you peeking through her bedroom window! I knew you'd get busted one day, loverboy."

"No," I said, through clenched teeth. "It wasn't anything like that, Dan. It wasn't anything like that at all."

Dan said, "Turn on the light, Kyle. Tell me what's going on."

For another minute or two I just sat there. I didn't ever want to leave my brother's side. But then he nudged me, and I staggered over to turn on the light. Any other time I got a chuckle out of that face-plate on Dan's light switch—a cartoon drawing of a well-hung pervert

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opening his trench-coat, the switch his vulgar knob exposed for all to see—but this time I just stared at it blankly before returning to sit beside Dan on the bed.

“Aghh, God.” My brother pretended to shriek in agony when the lights came on.

In a daze I glanced around his room, at all those trophies from his high school basketball team, at his movie posters (his favorites at the time: *Rocky*, *Jaws*, and *Kentucky Fried Movie*) and pin-ups of rock stars like Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith. My teary gaze lingered longest on the Farrah Fawcett centerfold above his stereo. Farrah wore a pink one-piece bathing suit in that glossy photograph. Her lips were pursed and she stared at the camera with a hungry expression I would recognize years later as “bedroom eyes.” The picture was signed, but a crooked DISCO SUCKS bumper sticker covered the “Stu” to whom it had been personalized (Dan had purchased the poster at a yard sale for a nickel). The closer I came to puberty the more infatuated I became with that picture, with Farrah’s supple curves and hints of exposed woman-flesh, but this time I stared right through the model. She might as well have been dead and blue up there.

Dead and blue...

Outside, the rain continued as if it might never cease.

“Shit,” Dan said, rubbing gritty sleep from his eyes. “Eight o’clock’s gonna come real early.” He yawned again, loud, took a second to scratch his crotch before staring at me with one eyebrow cocked. “So what’s the matter, little bro? You have a nightmare or something?”

Dan was eighteen years old, a recent graduate of Gerald R. Stokely High. God only knows why I turned out the runt and he had always been the gangly basketball player type, but my big brother stood six-foot-three at last count and Mom often said he was gonna keep growing till his head burst right through the ceiling. He had our father’s deep blue eyes—the only visible trait from Dad that I can claim as well—and a head of sandy-blond hair he wore in one of those “bowl-cut” styles.

Dan had been pondering a career in gynecology. Gynecology or politics, he hadn’t decided which. It was the sort of thing folks liked to

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tease him about (“one wrong move and you’re in deep shit either way,” his friend Chris said one night and, although I didn’t get it then, I giggled like it was the funniest thing I ever heard), but Dan never joked about his future. In less than seven hours on the night in question he was scheduled to board a plane headed to Tallahassee, Florida, where he would spend the next four years as a student of Florida State University. I don’t think I have to tell you my thoughts on *that* matter. The whole town seemed to idolize my big brother, the way he’d earned that basketball scholarship with little effort. He had become a sort of local hero. I, however, could not get past my own selfish desire to keep him in Midnight forever. I honestly felt, as the moment of Dan’s departure grew closer, that my life would end the second he left me behind.

“Is something wrong, Kyle?” he asked me again. “What’s up?”

I could hold it in no longer. The dam inside of me broke at last, and a flood of tears began streaming down my face like the rain at my brother’s bedroom window.

“Hey... Kyle...?”

Dan had been sleeping in his Fruit-of-the-Looms and that baggy orange tank top with the big green 12 on it from his varsity basketball team. When he put his arm around me I couldn’t help but notice a musky odor about him beneath his sweaty sleep-smell and faint aroma of aftershave. It was a smell I would later in life recognize as the salty scent of sex.

“D-Dan,” I said, watching my hands fidget in my lap like pale creatures with minds of their own. “If I t-tell you something... do you p-promise not to tell anybody?”

“Sure, man.” He grinned, rubbed the top of my head with mock-roughness. “Unless, of course, you’re gonna confess you’re a fag. Then I’ll have to tell the world.”

Normally I would have giggled high and loud at that. I’m sure I would have frogged my big brother on the arm, called him “butt-wad” or “ass-lick.” But Dan realized I was in no mood for jokes the second the words were out of his mouth. His smile faded and his brow furrowed as he waited for me to tell my story.

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“You gotta promise, Dan,” I whispered. “Swear it... you can’t tell *anybody*.”

“Okay, I promise! Cross my heart and all that jive! Jeez, man—what *is* it?”

At last I told him, all rapid-fire words running together because otherwise I feared I might never get it out: “*Lastnight-aftertheAppleGalaIsawagirlgetmurdered.*”

For those next seconds the only sound between us was the muffled drone of the rain upon our roof. A quiet but steadily building soundtrack for my own personal horror movie just beginning.

Finally, Dan said, “You’re not kidding around, are you, Kyle? Good God. You’re serious.”

“I’m serious.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

I shook my head.

“Not even Mom?”

“Especially not Mom.”

“Who was it?” Dan asked.

“What?”

He bit at his thumbnail, spat a pale sliver of it across the room, but never took his eyes off me. “The... girl. Who was she?”

I wiped at my dripping nose with the collar of my Spider-Man pajamas. “I don’t know. She... looked kinda familiar, I guess. But I’m not sure. Her face... oh, God, Danny... her *f-face*. It was... *a-all messed up.*”

I stared down at my feet, studied my big toe poking through a hole in my left sock. For some reason I suddenly found it hard to make eye contact with Dan. As if *I* had done something wrong. Even Farrah glared down at me accusingly from her place upon the wall, and I wished she would stop.

“We gotta tell somebody,” Dan said.

I quickly looked back up at him. “*We?*”

“Sure. You don’t think you’re gonna be alone in this, do you? I’m with ya, little bro. All the way.”

“No,” I said. “That’s why I made you promise. I can’t tell *anyone*.”

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“First thing in the morning, we’ll talk to Sheriff Baker. I’ll go with you, tell him what you saw. My plane doesn’t leave till ten. The sheriff can—”

“No, Danny! No! You don’t understand!”

My brother flinched beneath my harsh tone. “Shh. Okay. Easy. Why don’t you tell me exactly what happened...”

“He was *there*, Dan,” I whispered. “The sheriff was *there*.”

Dan went pale. My big brother—my rock, my role model, my portrait of strength when I had nowhere else to turn—looked like he’d been punched in the face.

“Sheriff Baker killed that girl. He *murdered* her. I saw it with my own two eyes.”

Two

Midnight, North Carolina, held its Annual Apple Gala every year during the first weekend in August. It was such an exciting time for the whole town, I remember, and each festival seemed infinitely better than the last. It hardly mattered that, as adolescence dawned, I outgrew the Free Fire Engine Rides, the Dunk-Your-Teachers Booth (“All Proceeds Go To United Way!”), and the one-time allure of the Miniature Petting Zoo sponsored by the Futch Bros. Dairy outside of town. Although I eventually reached an age at which I considered myself far too “cool” to enjoy the silly antics of the Gala’s clowns and the cheap noisemakers those grease-painted jesters tossed to the masses of fun-drunk children, that point was moot. Everyone, of all ages, loved Midnight’s Annual Apple Gala. Vendors hawked delicious cotton candy, caramel apples, and fat funnel cakes throughout the two-day affair. All along the sidewalks of Main Street aspiring artists hawked their homemade crafts, competing nonstop with a dozens of other amateur doll-makers, caricaturists, and whittlers for the dollars of the masses. I often reminisce on those spectacular days, and I can hear the innocent laughter of children beneath the wackier, louder chuckling of the dancing clowns (local retirees like Greta Morgan, Hap Somerside and Marvin Creedle, folks who dressed up every year “just for the kiddies” and seemed to have the time of their lives just playing young again). I can still hear the phantom tones of the Gerald R. Stokely High School Band, with their off-key renditions of songs I did not know (the theme from *Star Wars* excepted, of course) but which somehow seemed familiar. And of course the smells... oh, the smells! Those mouth-watering aromas seemed to linger about Midnight for several weeks after the Gala’s conclusion, and to this day they conjure images in my head of tiny hands sticky with cotton candy, paper nacho boats steaming with mounds of hot yellow cheese, and humongous apples impaled upon Popsicle sticks dripping with sticky strands of caramel.

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My God, what a grand time we all had! Midnight's Annual Apple Gala was the dying summer's grand finale, its glorious swan song if you will, as well as our town's boisterous welcome to the autumn that took its place.

They were the greatest days of my childhood, those annual celebrations. Such perfect memories.

Once upon a time.

On the night of August 5, 1977, I rode with my big brother to the Apple Gala, as was tradition every year. This time, however, Dan informed me — with a sly wink and a suggestive waggling of his tongue — that I should make myself scarce after the Gala. Seems he and Julie, the girl he'd been dating for a couple of years, planned to pay one last visit up to Storch's Rim before he left for college. I took his hint, could even appreciate Dan's motives in some way I was as yet unable to comprehend. Of course, I especially didn't mind the whole plan since Dan loaded up my Schwinn bicycle in the back of his pickup, assuring me that if I promised not to tell Mom I could ride home by myself after the Gala. How I used to cherish that spectacular sense of freedom I felt when secretly cruising through Midnight on my bike late at night. Dan insisted I return home by ten o'clock, though, a stipulation he sternly imposed with one long, skinny finger in my face. He rarely talked down to me, but when he really meant something — God, that was when he looked most like our father.

He was my hero, my idol. If I grew up to be half as cool as my big brother, I used to think, I'd make it all right in the world.

So we shook on it. Dan gave my wrist a minor Indian burn "to consummate the deal" and we swore Mom would never know a thing. This covered Dan's "scorin' some poontang," he said, as well as my "gallyvantin' through the woods like some kinda little monkey." As long as I promised to be home by ten, everything would be kosher.

Kosher. Dan used to say that a lot, and I never knew what the hell it meant.

In any event, I knew I had to stick by my word. God forbid Mom

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ever found out her youngest son had ventured through the Snake River Woods alone. Or that Dan had allowed me to do so.

She would undoubtedly kill us both. Slowly.

With our mother, that was only *slightly* an exaggeration.

There's something I should tell you about Darlene Mackey. I'm not ashamed of it, though in those days you would have been hard-pressed to get me to talk about it at all.

My mother was an alcoholic, a die-hard alcoholic who would continue to be such until the day she died. It was that very disease that killed her, in fact. Don't get me wrong — I loved my mother. I know she did the best she could under the circumstances, raising my brother and me all by herself. She worked long, hard hours in the local woodworking plant to support her family. But nothing had been quite the same in the Mackey household since the day that man in Dad's division showed up decorated with all his fancy stripes and medals to tell Mom her husband was dead. I think after my father died she built a frigid wall around her heart so nothing could get in or out. And she turned to the bottle to help her deal with it all.

Neither Dan nor I ever said anything to Mom about her problem. Perhaps we should have tried during some rare moment when she was sober, but we knew it would only start another fight. If Mom was happy, see, *everyone* was happy. If she was pissed, she could be the nastiest person you ever met. Her disease seemed to hang over our odd little trio like some invisible veil, slowly smothering the family but never quite killing us all the way. We could see it, we could smell it, and God knows we felt it all over us like walking through spiderwebs in the forest. But there wasn't a damned thing we could do about it.

If I may digress for a moment, I remember an incident several months before the Apple Gala when Mom was at her worst...

I'd gotten up to grab a snack in the middle of the night. Some milk and cookies, maybe a Twinkie. I made my way down the hall, turned the corner, but froze when I entered the living room.

Mom sat in Dad's old armchair in the center of the room, her

mousy brown hair for once not tied into a neat little bun but flowing to her shoulders like muddy rapids. Her baggy pink nightgown seemed to swallow her whole. Her cheeks had that ruddy pink glow they always got when she'd been drinking. Lightning flickered beyond the big bay window on the far side of our living room every few seconds, casting a strobe-light effect upon her statuesque form.

She was so, so... *still*.

The rain started then, a heavy downpour that pelted the roof like scampering feet, and I squinted in the darkness to see that Mom held a photograph of my father. She gripped its shiny gold frame in one hand so tightly her knuckles seemed to glow bone-white in the flashes of angry lightning outside. In her other hand she held a bottle of Wild Turkey.

"Help you with something, Kyle?" she said suddenly, and my heart skipped a beat. Her tone wasn't angry, just cold. But she didn't even turn around. As if she had eyes in the back of her head.

"I couldn't sleep," I replied. "Thought I'd, um, grab a bite to eat."

She said nothing for the next few minutes. Just kept staring at that picture of Dad as if in some spooky trance, a photograph I still have of him today: standing in front of a plane in Saigon, looking so regal in his finely pressed fatigues... Sergeant First-Class Daniel Emmett Mackey, Sr., decorated war hero, posthumous recipient of the Purple Heart as well as Bronze and Silver Stars...

God, how we missed him. My father had been killed by a sniper's bullet on the other side of the world when I was five years old. They said he died instantly, didn't suffer at all, but that hardly helped us cope with such a loss. As time passed my memories of Dad grew foggy, yet not a day went by when I didn't wish he were around to do with me all the things fathers do with their sons.

Mom turned toward me, took another swig from her bottle. I felt naked beneath her glassy-eyed gaze.

"Where's your brother?" she asked me, her voice flat and lifeless.

"He's in bed, Mom."

She laughed. A low, almost masculine laugh. I stared down at my feet, wondered what was so funny. But now I know. Nothing. It was

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the liquor, laughing. Laughing at my family, mocking my mother's addiction through its slack-jawed, slurry-voiced slave.

“Mom—”

“Go get him, Kyle. My precious Kyle.” She stared at me sweetly, but something about her expression made me feel dirty. It reminded me of the look a ravenous wolf might give a sheep strayed from its flock, seconds before said wolf begins to feast.

“Dan's asleep, Mom. Apparently he got in pretty late.”

“*Apparently*,” Mom mocked me. But her voice remained so calm, which made her words all the more chilling. “Go get your brother, Kyle. Wake him up. Now.”

With that she turned her back to me again, and resumed her dark ménage a trois with the liquor and Dad's old photograph. End of discussion.

What else could I do? I sighed, staggered down the hallway, dreading what I knew was about to ensue. My heart raced. I felt like such a traitor. It took me several minutes to wake Dan, but finally he sort of sleepwalked out of bed in a pair of yellow boxers and a ratty old Alfred E. Neuman (“WHAT, ME WORRY?”) T-shirt. He cursed as he followed me, when one of his shins barked against the edge of his bedroom doorway.

I would have preferred to be anywhere on Earth than in the Mackey house that evening. I don't know what got Mom started in the first place. I suppose she'd had a nightmare about Dad, probably rolled over to find that picture of him which looked so much like her first-born son staring at her from her nightstand. This would have been only a matter of days after all the news programs announced how President Carter had pardoned ten thousand Vietnam draft evaders, and I guess that got Mom brooding on the injustice of it all. Dan tried to talk sensibly with her while she swung her arms and drank from her bottle and swore at him through a spray of spittle that she knew he was “gonna run off to die just like his father” and how did he think his “precious Julie” would like that? It broke my heart. The whole thing ended with Mom ripping Dan's shirt, trying to kick him in the balls while she swung at him and wailed, “You don't care about me or your

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brother! You're gonna leave us just like that sorry son-of-a-bitch!" until she finally grew too tired to continue.

Dan caught her arms and with my help carefully laid her on the couch to sleep it off. Within a matter of seconds she was out like nothing had ever happened.

Dan looked at me, sighed.

"You okay, little bro?" he asked me.

"I'm fine," I said. "You're the one I'm worried about."

"It's cool," he assured me with a sick little laugh. "I'm used to it, ya know?"

And that we were. So used to it.

To say the very least.

The Snake River Woods — so called because they ran perpendicular to a winding stream on the northern edge of our county named, you guessed it, Snake River—cut through the middle of Midnight, bisecting the town almost perfectly into two halves. On one side lay the town's business district, home to establishments like the Big Pig Grocery, Jack's Hardware, Corriher Guns n' Ammo, and the offices of the *Midnight Sun*; on the other sat Midnight's residential area, where our middle-class homes were nestled in a comfortable sort of juxtaposition that never felt too crowded despite the county's growing population.

The Snake River Woods was one of my favorite places to go in the whole world, my own private domain where I could be alone, I could explore, I could do all the things boys do without adult eyes always watching like something might get broken.

My favorite thing of all was the Old Shack. And the Well.

That's how I saw them in my mind: not just any old shack, not just any well... but *the Old Shack*. And *the Well*.

This was my secret place. My *Secret Place*. All boys have a Secret Place, I believe, and the Old Shack was mine.

It sat, far as I knew, smack dab in the middle of the Snake River Woods. My estimate might have been off several hundred yards, of

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course, but for my purposes the Well and the Old Shack were the perfect landmarks for the halfway point between the business district of Midnight and my home at 2217 Old Fort Road on the opposite side of the forest.

The Old Shack was little more than four slanted walls, a rotting wooden floor, and a battered tin roof. No door. Inside lay a mildewed mattress that had once been white but had long ago gone a sickly yellow-gray. I often wondered if someone used to live there, if he or she had lain upon that mattress as the sounds of the forest lulled him or her to sleep. As improbable as such a thing seemed to me I suppose at one time *someone* had called my Old Shack home. A crotchety old hermit, perhaps. A family of hippies who had turned their backs on the Establishment to live amongst nature, but then abandoned that idea when the Age of Aquarius met its demise. Better yet, I often imagined that my Old Shack might have once been a refuge for runaway slaves in the 1800s, a way station on the Underground Railroad, and such possibilities made me all the more proud of my Secret Place, as if by frequenting the site I somehow became a part of history.

The Well sat eight or nine feet from the eastern wall of my Old Shack. It was an ancient, craggy thing made of fat brown rocks like those bordering the Snake River on the other side of town. It stood even with my belt line in those days, and was about half as wide as my closet back home. Thick moss as soft as a kitten's fur covered most of it (not to mention a plump gray hornet's nest on the side facing my neighborhood); no rope, no bucket, no fancy little roof like one might imagine if one ponders the aesthetics of wells for any length of time. Far as I knew, the thing went all the way to the center of the Earth. Sometimes I would imagine the Morlocks from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* living and hunting and doing dark Morlock things down there. I envisioned them looking up at me as I peered down at them, seeing me where I could not see them. It gave me delightful chills, that scenario, the same kind I used to get reading comics like *The Witching Hour* or watching Darren McGavin stalk the night as Kolchak.

I never even told Dan about my Secret Place. I don't know why. I'm

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sure my big brother would have understood, would have shared fond memories with me of his own Secret Places when he was my age...yet the Old Shack and the Well were the only things in the world not even *Dan* knew about me. And that made my Secret Place all the more special.

A single room. One filthy, moth-eaten mattress. And lots of mosquitoes. They were all you'd find inside my Secret Place. But I didn't mind. I never stayed more than a couple of hours. I think I feared if my Old Shack got too familiar it might lose its special magic.

It never did. It never lost its magic.

After the night of August 5, 1977, however, it sure as hell lost its appeal.

Forever.

Three

Mom never bought us a pet—“nasty things,” she called them, especially dogs. Cats were out of the question too because she was allergic to them. I did buy a goldfish once with some birthday money my great aunt Florence sent me (I named him “Pop-Eye,” not in honor of any spinach-eating cartoon sailor but because of the animal’s huge, buggy eyes, which made old Pop-Eye appear as if he were in a constant state of fishy surprise); that lone pet died mere days after I brought him home, however, when I failed to heed Dan’s warnings about overfeeding my aquatic friend with the fragile belly.

Pop-Eye looked famished, had been my argument.

And that was the extent of my childhood experience with pets.

So...since we couldn’t have pets, I often treated my *bike* like one, weird as that sounds. I always thought bicycles were better than dogs, in fact, because you can ride bikes! I loved mine. I talked to him, treated him like a beloved member of my family. I even named him. I called my bicycle Burner. God only knows how I came up with that. I suppose I envisioned the bright blue bike as some mighty rocket from an Isaac Asimov novel, flaring out the back as it took off faster than light.

Burner was a 1975 Schwinn Scrambler that Mom had given me for my tenth birthday. He sported a larger gear than the more streamlined Stingray model idolized by most kids my age, as well as a razor fender, a high-flanged front hub, and original BMX-style handlebars with those hard rubber grips that made you feel like more than just a kid on a bicycle. They made you feel like an *adventurer*, a rugged explorer whose hometown was an uncharted land of delicious danger just waiting to be conquered.

Burner was fast, too—did I mention that? Oh, yes. Back then I was quite sure he might have been the fastest bike ever built. I can’t begin to tell you how many scraped knees and bloody elbows were the results of our adventures around my hometown. Once I even broke my collarbone over on Orosel Avenue, when I decided to brave what us

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kids called Evel Knievel Hill, but that never stopped me from hopping right back on Burner and doing it all over again.

I never regretted a single moment I shared with my best friend, even when our adventures resulted in numerous stitches or the loss of precious lifeblood.

Battle scars, I thought of the many injuries I obtained atop mighty Burner. And that made it all okay.

After the Gala I rode Burner out of Midnight's business district, past the new KMart Plaza on Harris Boulevard, down the alley between the Midnight Drug & Sundry and Hank's Hobby Shop, until I found our trail. It began behind the vacant lot of an abandoned feed store, a tin building with a rotten loading dock out front speckled with broken glass and soggy cigarette butts. Burner and I didn't create the trail we used to get to my Old Shack—it had been there as long as I could remember—but we helped keep it a trail. I often imagined that some giant snail had once crawled up from the bowels of the Earth to visit Midnight, but the founders of our town shot at the poor creature simply because they did not understand it. Where our trail began was where the pitiful behemoth had dragged itself into the Snake River Woods to nurse its wounds; where the trail stopped was where it had lain down to die. A crazy story, I know, but it was fun.

As I always did, at the point where the forest swallowed up our path completely, I hopped off Burner and proceeded to walk him the rest of the way. By the time I reached the edge of that grove in the middle of the woods where the Well and the Old Shack sat like old friends awaiting my return, a soft rain had begun to fall on Midnight. My clothes grew damp as Burner and I walked, and my hair soon lay plastered to my skull as if a schoolyard bully had spilled something there during one mean, messy prank.

I picked up my pace.

Finally the Old Shack was upon me, a squat black shape in the darkness that at first resembled a tired old beast stopped in the clearing to catch its breath.

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“Here we are,” I said to Burner, stopping within a hundred yards or so of the Well. I patted the seat of my beloved bicycle, admired the way his slick blue body glistened in the night’s falling rain.

But then, I slowed as I drew closer. As I noticed something about my Secret Place.

Something *wrong*.

I frowned, leaned Burner up against a massive oak tree to our left. I knelt down beside my bike as if Burner might protect me.

There were lights on in there, inside my Old Shack. Flickering lights, as if from candles or kerosene lanterns.

Someone was inside.

“What the hell?” I whispered.

Never before had I encountered another person intruding upon my Secret Place. It was the first time, in fact, that I had seen *any* sign of civilization this deep in the Snake River Woods, with the exception of an occasional private plane coming in for a landing at the Midnight Independent Hangar. Not only was I *angered* by this invasion of my territory . . . I knew, immediately, that something *was not right* here.

“Stay here, Burner,” I said, as if he might defy the laws of physics to leave me there alone. I suppose I wanted to imagine my bike as a living companion, because somehow that made me feel better about the developments at hand.

Above the whisper of the midnight rain through the trees and the chorus of crickets chirping around me, I could hear at least two different voices coming from inside my Old Shack . . .

Mumbling, conspiratorial tones. An angry curse every few seconds.

Under that, music. Motown. Tinny, as if on a cheap radio.

Slowly I made my way to the Well, leaving Burner propped against the oak tree behind me. I approached the Old Shack at an angle from which I could see in at least one of its dusty yellow windows, and each step seemed to take hours. I flinched at the horrid crunching of leaves beneath my feet—a sound so terribly loud, so obvious. I knew the intruders inside were bound to hear me.

Finally I reached the Well, knelt down behind it. The rain pattered down inside there like tiny hands clapping against its stone walls. Like

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ghostly children trying to escape its cold black depths. I held my breath, squinted through the closest window of my Old Shack to see what was afoot...

The blurry tops of two heads were all I could see at first. Two men? Maybe. Until I ventured closer, though, I could not make out their features through that filthy glass. The window was covered with a dusty film, thin gray curtains of cobwebs above a silver-black carpet of dead flies, rat turds, and cricket carcasses.

“What kinda goddamn mess you got us into, Henry?” I heard one of the men say, a deep voice with a gruff Southern accent that sounded very familiar.

I didn’t move. I didn’t breathe.

“Jesus H. Christ.” Deep, basso.

I *knew* that voice! But from where?

I still didn’t move. I still didn’t breathe. I listened. Waited.

“I said I was sorry, Dad,” came the reply at last. This voice was higher-pitched than the first, whiny. It sounded like a teenager.

“You’re *sorry*. I suppose you think that makes everything okay? You fucked up, Henry, and *I’m the one who has to fix this shit!*”

“I know, Dad.” The younger voice again. “I wish I could take it back.”

That did it. I *had* to see more. Curiosity killed the cat, as the saying goes, but some would argue that inquisitive ol’ feline retired from this world so satisfied...

“What a fuckin’ mess,” said the man inside as I moved closer to the cabin. A cough. “My God.”

As I drew closer to my Old Shack, I recognized the Marvin Gaye song playing on the radio inside, a soulful melody so ominously out of place here. Marvin was singing about lovin’ and kissin’ and sexual healin’.

But then his song went silent in midverse.

“For Chrissake, turn off that nigger shit. I can’t even hear myself think.”

Several long, quiet minutes passed, ticking by with each clamorous beat of my heart. The shrill chirping of crickets and the steady hiss of

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the rain around me seemed deafening now, yet neither could drown out the sounds of heavy footsteps on the Old Shack's wooden floor, or the intermittent thumps and scrapes against its interior walls. Every few seconds I heard a labored grunt, as if the two men were moving stuff around in there.

At last I took another cautious step forward, and I could feel the vibrations of their movements beneath my feet, through the muddy ground.

My heartbeat grew more frantic with every passing minute. My brow was slick with sweat.

"This is bad, Henry," came the deeper voice again. "You've really outdone yourself this time."

"I know, Dad." The younger man sounded like he might start crying. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"We'll have to burn her clothes. Everything. Clean all this shit up till there ain't even a pussy hair left."

That cinched it. No way could I leave without knowing who they were. What they were doing in there. But even at a distance of just several feet from the cabin, I was too short to view more than the tops of the two men's heads through the windows.

Still moving as tentatively as my Great Snail might have once moved, I sneaked around toward the rear of my Old Shack and began searching for something to stand on so I could see inside the filthy windows. In the thick black shadows behind the Old Shack lay several plastic milk crates... an ancient toilet, cracked and yellow... a couple of busted Mason jars... and an old red dog food bowl (BOO, read the name on the side) filled with dead brown pine needles floating in stagnant green water. But then, further back, I spotted exactly what I needed. A small homemade table constructed from what looked like a tree-stump base and a flat cross-section of a larger stump for its surface. Perfect. If I dragged it over to one of the windows—without making too much noise in the process, of course—I could climb atop it for a perfect view inside my Old Shack.

I grunted as I sat the table upright, bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood. Beneath the scarce light of the night's yellow half-moon I

wincing at the sight of thousands of earthworms and centipedes and what we used to call gray “roly-poly bugs” churning in the soft ground where the table had lain for years. I tried not to think about black widows and the sorts of places they liked to hide.

I wiped my hands on my shorts, carried the thing with great effort to the side of my Old Shack, careful not to drag it through the leaves.

Several more hoarse curses drifted out the Old Shack and into the woods. The continuous din of heavy footsteps inside kept a sort of counter-rhythm to the furious beat of my heart. I flinched when something slammed into the wall closest to me so hard the whole cabin seemed to shake.

Slowly I crawled atop my makeshift stool, making sure I was properly balanced before trusting the stump-table with all my weight.

I ran one hand through my rain-damp hair, leaned forward to peer through the window...

And I gasped.

Though I had expected to recognize the men inside, suspected that what they were doing was something far more sinister than playing a friendly game of poker, my jaw dropped as I stared through the spider-web pattern of cracks in that dirty window...

I could see everything now. Much more than I really wanted.

The two men in my Old Shack I did know. They were local men.

Sheriff Burt Baker. And his son, Henry.

I recognized Henry from the Big Pig Grocery on Brady Boulevard, where he worked part time as a bagboy. He looked about twenty years old, give or take, and I suppose the girls his age might have considered him handsome if a tad awkward. His lips were full, red, almost feminine. He had been trying to grow a mustache, apparently, but had experienced scant luck with it so far. He wore his dark brown hair just shy of his shoulders, like Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Henry suffered from a slight case of Tourette’s Syndrome, I noticed as I stood there watching the men, and though I did not know the name of his affliction at the time I did recognize that his nervous tics—a twitchy clenching and unclenching of his fists every few minutes followed by a quick upward jerk of his head—weren’t normal. By no

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means was his problem severe, yet he could not have hidden his occasional fidgeting even if he tried.

On the night this all happened, Henry Baker wore a faded Bruce Springsteen *Born To Run* T-shirt, jeans so tight they looked painful, and a pair of powdery-looking latex gloves.

They *both* wore gloves, I noticed, as the two men in my Old Shack went about their morbid business . . .

Sheriff Burt Baker was a tall, stocky man in his mid-forties, a fellow whose khaki uniform never seemed to fit quite right, especially around his gut. His hair was short, black, always looked as if weeks had passed since he last washed it. Though he was Caucasian, far as I knew, his skin was so dark I often wondered if the sheriff's family tree might have branched off at some point from Native American lineage. Baker's cheeks were pock-marked with bad acne scars, his lips were large and almost pouty-looking, and as crude as this may sound I must admit I considered the sheriff to be one of the most unattractive folks I'd ever met. This opinion grew tenfold, of course, when I saw what ugly things he and his son were up to inside my Old Shack . . .

They were hard at work moving the body of a young woman. A girl. She could have been no older than fifteen or sixteen, at most. I figured she might have been pretty by the dim light of a kerosene lantern in the middle of the room, her hair long and straight and blond, her figure trim . . . but I couldn't be sure.

Because her face had been battered beyond recognition.

My stomach churned as I gazed upon her ruined features, a pulpy mess of swollen flesh and crimson smears and awful purple bruises. That poor, poor girl. Her breasts were small, nipples very pink against her pale skin, and I saw faint purple bruises around her areoles, along her neck and collarbone, even on the inside of her thighs like dark blotchy fingerprints.

Although I had done nothing wrong here, I felt a sudden pang of gut-wrenching shame. And something else. At the sight of the naked girl I felt a mysterious growing warmth below my belt that I could not explain. It made me sick. And ashamed.

My God, what had they done to her?

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The sheriff held the dead girl by her arms, Henry by her legs. Her head rolled limply to one side as they propped her up in one corner of the room next to a small battery-powered radio with a bent antenna. In the same corner sat a single kerosene lantern and a scuffed leather jacket I assumed belonged to Henry. Beside the jacket lay a pile of what must have been the dead girl's clothes: a pink skirt with lavender piping, orange blouse, a pair of Keds, panties and a small lace bra. The panties, I noticed, were ripped down one side.

The dead girl's eyes were closed, but I couldn't help noticing how her mouth fell open as the two men plopped her down. Just enough to give me a glimpse of her perfect white teeth and too pink tongue. When they let her go and she hit the floor, her body made a low farting sound.

I covered my mouth with one hand, swallowed back the bitter taste of bile rising in the back of my throat.

Henry Baker stepped away from the body, grimacing. "Aghh, Jesus—"

"It happens," the sheriff grunted, without batting an eye. "Don't worry about it."

For the first time, I noticed the hot-pink scratches that ran from just under Henry Baker's left eye down to his jaw line. Three long, nasty gashes like claw-marks from one very pissed-off cat. I touched my own cheek when I saw them, made a low hissing noise through my teeth.

She hadn't gone down without a fight.

The sheriff cleared his throat, made a sound like hawking up phlegm though he never expelled it from his mouth. "Son of a bitch. Did you ever fuck up this time, Henry..."

Henry turned to look at his father, but when he found himself facing the dead girl again his gaze quickly averted to his shoes.

Sheriff Baker's hands went to his hips as he stared at his son accusingly. I knew that pose well—it was the sheriff's authoritarian pose, the one he took when watching out-of-town drunks do their clumsy walks along the white line, the getting-down-to-business stance he assumed while standing over the loser of a scuffle down at Lou's

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Tavern. It was the posture of a well-respected man, Polk County's elected keeper of the peace.

"Please just tell me you didn't take her to the Gala," he said. His voice sounded as if he were in pain. "Tell me nobody saw you two together."

"Just that black guy, with the wagon," Henry said.

"What black guy?"

"One they call Rooster."

"You talkin' about that retard, walks around collectin' cans?"

"Yeah."

"Shit!" Sheriff Baker's hands balled into fists. He covered his mouth with one, gnashed his teeth, looked as if the world had just dropped out from under him. "Goddammit, Henry!"

"It's okay, Dad. He ain't gonna say anything. It was dark. I don't know if he even saw us. You know that nigger's always in his own little world anyway." Henry risked a self-conscious giggle at that, but then covered his mouth as if to force it back in should his quip rekindle the flames of his father's rage.

The sheriff pointed one fat finger at his son, looked like he might scold the boy some more, but didn't. He arched his back till his bones popped like kernels of popcorn, shook his head slowly before eyeing the long furrows in Henry's raw red cheek. A cruel smile crept through his stern expression.

"Got you good, didn't she?"

Henry's hand went to his wounded face. He winced.

The sheriff's chuckle was so deep it was nearly inaudible.

Suddenly lightning lit up the forest, and for a moment everything around me seemed basked in daylight. Thunder rumbled a few seconds later like the sonic boom of an invisible airplane hitting Mach 1 above the woods, and the rain began to pick up, harder. I flinched beneath Mother Nature's fury, tensed as I saw the two men inside do the same.

The sheriff turned toward the window through which I peered, his cold blue eyes narrowed.

I froze, my teeth clenched like those of a stray dog kicked in the

ribs. My heart slammed in my chest. The scent of ozone tickled my nostrils, making me want to sneeze. For a second I could have sworn Sheriff Baker looked right at me. Right *through* me. His bad complexion appeared rougher than ever during that moment, the way the light struck those old acne scars on his cheeks and the shadows of his surroundings danced about his pitted flesh. His face resembled something carved from thick red clay with a blunt tool, all blotchy and coarse and hard.

Finally he turned back to his son, and I could breathe again.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson the last time?” The sheriff’s voice cracked a bit, as if he were so disappointed in this child he had raised to do the right thing. “I mean, after what happened... for Chrissake, you’d think...”

He trailed off, shaking his head.

Henry said nothing, just kept staring at the floor. He gave a little shrug. His right hand clenched and unclenched three times fast within its rubber glove. Then his left, once.

“You’re absolutely *positive* no one saw you two together?” his father asked him.

“Swear to God.”

“Just the nigger?”

“Just the nigger.”

“Where’s the Ford?”

“What?”

“Your fuckin’ truck, Henry! We ain’t got all night.”

“That vacant lot across from the ABC Store,” Henry replied, sounding fatigued. He followed this with some unintelligible mumble.

Sheriff Baker stood there scratching at his bumpy brown chin for the next few minutes, thinking over every detail of his scheme.

The rain tapped hard at the shack’s cheap tin roof like someone dropping ten-penny nails from the heavens. I strained to listen to the goings-on inside my Old Shack, but the rain began to fall harder. Louder.

“We’re gonna fix this, Henry,” said Sheriff Baker. “We’re gonna fix this, and it’s gonna be okay.”

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Henry watched his father move across the room. Tears glistened in his eyes. But he said nothing.

“I got an idea. I think it’ll work. But we gotta move fast. Come on. Grab her legs again. We’re gonna take her to my patrol car.”

On weak knees, Henry moved to obey.

They hefted the body between them.

And that’s when it happened, as if on cue.

That’s when the dead girl came alive.

We hope you enjoyed this special preview of
MIDNIGHT RAIN.

MIDNIGHT RAIN will be available for
reservation in early May and
will be published in late June.

Please watch the Earthling newsletters
(and site) for details! Thank you.