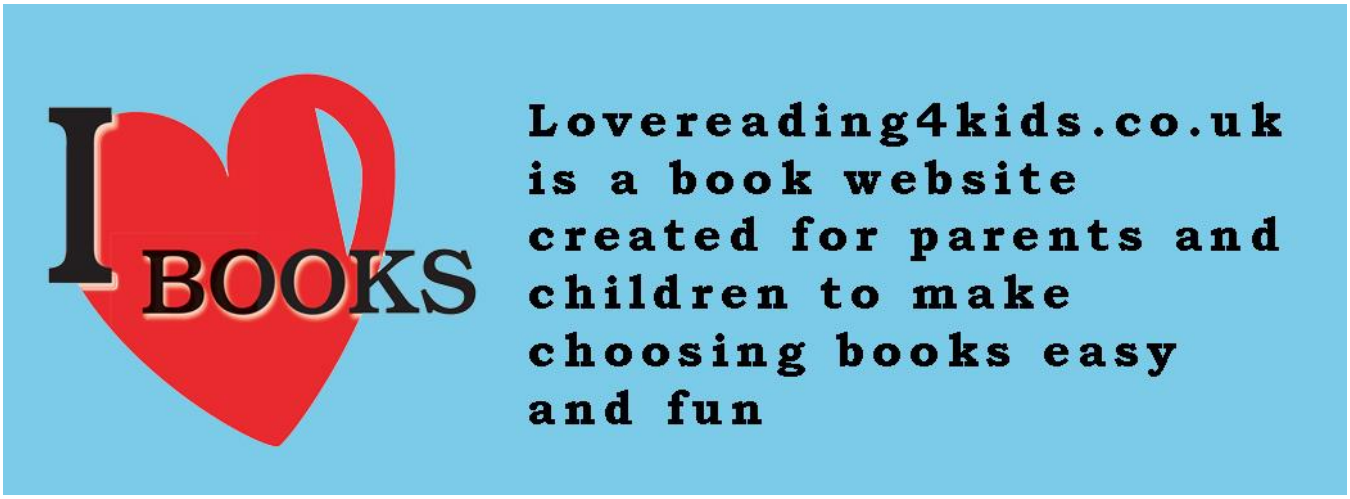

Opening extract from

After the First Death

Written by

Robert Cormier

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I keep thinking that I have a tunnel in my chest. The path the bullet took, burrowing through the flesh and sinew and whatever muscle the bullet encountered (I am not the macho-muscled type, not at five eleven and one hundred eighteen pounds). Anyway, the bullet went through my chest and out again. The wound has healed and there is no pain. The two ends of the tunnel are closed although there's a puckering of the skin at both ends of the tunnel. And a faint redness. The puckering has a distinct design, like the old vaccination scar on my father's arm. Years from now, the wound will probably hurt the way my father's old wounds hurt him, the wounds he received in those World War Two battles. My mother always jokes about the wounds: oh, not the wounds themselves but the fact that he professes to forecast weather by the phantom pains and throbbings in his arms and legs.

Will my wound ache like his when I am his age?

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And will I be able to tell when the rain will fall by the pain whistling through the tunnel in my chest?

I am joking, of course, but my joking is entirely different from my mother's tender jokes.

I am joking because I won't have stayed around to become a human barometer or an instrument capable of forecasting weather.

But who's the joke on?

The first of many questions about my presence here.

Keep a scorecard handy.

My father is scheduled to visit me today.

His first visit since the Bus and the Bridge last summer.

I am typing this in the room at Castle and it's beautiful here as I write this. Through the window, I can see the quadrangle and the guys indulging in a snowball fight. The first snowfall of the season. The snow is late this year. Christmas is only two weeks away. Thanksgiving was dry and cold with a pale sun in the sky but no wind. Perfect for a football game, the traditional game between Castle and Rushing Academy. Castle won, 21 to 6, and there was a big celebration on campus. Elliot Martingale brought these fireworks back from summer vacation; they were left over

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from July 4th at his family's place on Cape Cod, and he said they would be touched off when we won the big game on Thanksgiving Day. We won, he set them off. Beautiful. That's when I went to the john, swallowed fourteen sleeping pills, lay down on the bed listening to the cherry bombs explode and then a cluster of firecrackers going off like a miniature machine gun; and it was nice lying there, drifting away, and then I thought of the kids on the bus, strewn around like broken toys while the guns went off, and I started getting sick and rushed off to the bathroom to vomit.

Please do not consider these the notes of a self-pitying freak who needs the services of a psychiatrist.

I am not filled with pity for myself. And I'm not writing this to cop a plea of some kind.

I do not consider this a suicide note either.

Or even a prelude to one.

When the time comes to perform the act, I will do it without any prelude or prologue, and may simply walk up River Road one afternoon, arrive at Brimmler's Bridge, calmly climb the parapet or whatever it's called, and let myself plummet to the riverbed below.

I have deduced, reflecting on the Bus, that this would be the best way to shuffle off this mortal coil. Poetic justice, you see. Perhaps that's what I should have done when I was sent out to the Bus. The Bus was also on a bridge.

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That's when I should have taken the plunge, the dive, or the leap. The Bridge on which the Bus was perched is even higher than Brimmler's Bridge. Just think how I would have saved the day – and myself – that way.

And my father most of all.

But how many times is a person allowed to die?

Anyway, my parents are scheduled to arrive here late this morning.

Eleven o'clock to be exact.

My father's first visit since the Bus and the Bridge, but I already said that, didn't I?

My mother has been faithful about visiting. My mother is kind and witty and stylish. She is the essence of the loving wife and mother. She has such amazing strength, an inner strength that has nothing to do with the flexing of muscles. I always sensed it, even as a kid. My father has strength, too. But he has always been too shadowy to pin down. The nature of his profession, I realize now. His is the kind of profession that not only disguises the man but consumes him as well. And his family, too. Even my mother, with all her strength.

When she visited me the first time in September only a few days after my arrival, she played it cool and calm, and this is just what I needed.

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'Do you want to talk about it, Mark?' she asked.

My name is Ben, my father's name is Mark. If it had been anyone but her, I would have called it a Freudian slip. But she is too uncomplicated for that kind of thing.

I wondered how much she knew about what happened on the bridge. 'I'd rather not talk about it,' I said. 'Not just yet.'

'Fine,' she said, matter-of-factly, settling down for the visit, arranging her dress over her knees. She has beautiful legs and she is utterly feminine. She never wears slacks or pants suits, always skirts or dresses, even when she does housecleaning. She asked me about school and the classes and the guys, and I told her, talking mechanically, as if my mouth had nothing to do with the rest of my body. I told her about Mr Chatham, who is my math teacher and might have taught my father a generation ago. This is one of the benefits of attending your father's alma mater, my mother said, when she drove me up here last fall. She said I would be able to gather new insights on my father. I didn't tell her that Mr Chatham is practically senile, the butt of a thousand boyish and not-so-boyish pranks and jokes, and that he didn't remember my father at all. I had suggested the possibility to him. 'My name is Ben Marchand,' I'd told him, 'and my father came to Castle back before World War Two – do you remember him?'

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'Of course, dear boy,' he said, 'of course.'

But I did not believe him. His eyes were glazed and vacant, his hand shook, and he always seems about to leap out of harm's way. Which is a reflex action. Guys like Elliot Martingale and Biff Donateli rejoice in making old Chatham's last days lively. We keep him on his toes, keep him sharp, keep him from dropping into complete senility, Elliot says. How can a man drop out when he thinks a cherry bomb's going to go off in his pants any minute?

Anyway, I started to lie to my mother about Mr Chatham and his nonexistent memories of my father. 'He remembers Dad as a good student,' I said. 'Serious. Never fooled around much in class. A shy, sensitive lad: those were his exact words.' I tried to imitate Mr Chatham's rusty old voice: 'A little too thin for his height, lad, but you could see he would fill out someday and be an outstanding man.'

I could see immediately that she didn't believe me. She has many admirable qualities but she would never succeed as an actress. The disbelief was apparent in her eyes and in the expression on her face.

'Isn't Dad sensitive and wasn't he a good student?' I asked. 'He must have been. He's a general now, isn't he?'

'You know your father doesn't like to be called a general,' she said.

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'True,' I said, and felt myself drifting away from her, something I have been doing recently, drifting away while standing still, letting myself go as if the world is a huge blotter and I am being absorbed by it. 'But he is a general, isn't he?' I asked, persisting, suddenly not wanting to drift away, not at this particular moment, wanting to make a point. What point?

And then my mother's strength asserted itself. 'Ben,' she said, her voice like the snapping of a tree branch. It reminded me of old movies on television where someone is screaming hysterically and someone else slaps the screamer and the hysterics die down. Well, I wasn't screaming hysterically but I must admit that I was hysterical all right. You can be hysterical without screaming or ranting and raving, or hitting your head against a wall. You can be quietly hysterical sitting in a dorm talking to your mother, watching the September sun climbing the wall like a ladder as it filters in through a sagging shutter. And the slap doesn't have to be a physical act; it can be one word, *Ben*, your own name lashing out. Yet she did it with love. I have always been assured of her love. And even as I responded to her shouted *Ben*, snapping me back from the drifting, I still said to myself: But he is a goddam general, whether he likes it or not, and that's why I'm here.

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So we carried on a fairly normal conversation. About my classes, the guys: Yes, Mother, they're a good bunch. They leave me alone, mostly because I've come on the scene too late and it's hard to absorb me (they are not blotters, after all), but they are tactful, which surprises me really. I mean, Elliot Martingale is such a character with his clowning and all, and yet he came up to me the other day and said: 'Marchand, old bastard, I looked up the back issues of the papers the other day and you're all right, know that?'

I felt either like bawling like a baby or laughing madly; either way, he'd think I was a complete nut. I felt like bawling because those were the first words anyone at Castle had said directly to me and they confirmed my existence here, something I was beginning to doubt. Until that moment, I might have been invisible or not there at all. And I felt like laughing madly because what Martingale said was so very wrong. What Elliot Martingale read about in the papers, my part in the Bus and the incident at the Bridge, was a million miles from the truth. Not lies exactly, of course. But information that was misleading, vague where it should be specific, specific where it should be vague. Inner Delta is very good at that sort of thing, of course.

There, I've said it: Inner Delta.

Like pulling a bandage off a festering sore.

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Or a diseased rabbit from a soiled magician's hat.

Which, of course, is treason on my part, both as a son to my father and as a citizen of my country.

But do I really have a country?

And do I have citizenship anywhere?

I am a skeleton rattling my bones, a ghost laughing hollow up the sleeves of my shroud, a scarecrow whose straw is soaked with blood.

So much for the dramatics.

My name is Benjamin Marchand, son of Brigadier General and Mrs Marcus L. Marchand. Although I am temporarily lodged at Castleton Academy in Pompey, New Hampshire, my home is at 1245 Iwo Jima Avenue, Fort Delta, Massachusetts.

Stick around. I may pass out picture postcards any moment now.

* * *

Those asterisks denote the passage of time. From 8:15 A.M. when I began typing this to the present moment: 10:46 A.M. Don't ask what I was doing those two and a half (more or less) hours.

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But I'll tell you anyway.

After writing, I dressed and ran all the way up to Brimmler's Bridge, looked out at the frozen wasteland below, but decided for some perverse reason that I wanted to see my father before doing anything rash. Maybe I'm a masochist.

On the way back, I met Biff Donateli. He asked me if I would be joining the guys this evening in an excursion to the nearby domain of Pompey, where the amber of the gods would be quaffed by a select group of Knights. Knights of the Castle, get it? Anyway, Donateli talks like that – amber of the gods, for chrissakes – although he looks like a thug, a hit man, dark and hairy.

The invitation stopped me in my tracks. I almost did a double take, like in the movies.

'Maybe,' I said.

'That's the first complete sentence I've ever heard you utter,' Donateli said, hustling away, his coat spotted with small explosions of snow from the snowball fight. I envied him. Those make-believe wounds.

Then I felt invisible again and looked to see if I actually left footprints behind me in the snow.

Back to that conversation with my mother.

A leftover, a postscript, maybe.

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She said: 'That description of your father. The way you described him to old Mr Chatham. You realize you were describing yourself, don't you?'

'But Father, too?'

'You decide that, Ben.'

On the desk near the window there's a Castle yearbook. The year my father graduated. *Knights and Dayze.* I haven't looked at it yet. My father's picture is inside, of course, with the pictures of all his classmates, but I don't want to look at his picture. Not yet. I haven't seen him since the bridge because I don't want him seeing me. I'm afraid to even look at his picture because his eyes will be looking into mine. And I know I couldn't face those eyes even in a prep school yearbook.

I like that idea of picture postcards. Even verbal ones.

The first: Fort Delta.

An aerial view. High up, like from a communication satellite: Fort Delta, located in almost the geographical center of New England. Closer view: barracks, post exchanges, residences, etc. All buildings the same, whether the Ulysses S. Grant Theater or the General John J. Pershing School I attended, all as alike and featureless as those houses and hotels you buy in Monopoly.

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Delta is an ancient army post, with a history dating back to the Spanish-American War just before the turn of the century. I have no time to indulge in history and yet it's important to understand Delta in order to understand Inner Delta.

Fort Delta played its role through all the American wars – First World, Second World, Korea, Vietnam. And through the peace. As a processing center or a training ground for paratroopers and other specialists.

Home sweet home – that has always been Delta to me.

There was a report a few years ago that Fort Delta would be closed down as an economy move. This came at a time when there was antiwar sentiment in the nation.

I approached my father, horrified.

If a kid lived in New York City, they couldn't close down New York, could they? Or Boston? Or even Hallowell, next door to Delta? But this was my home, where I played ball, went to school, to the movies, to the chapel twice a year at Christmas and Easter, where my father worked, where my mother was active in the Officers' Wives Association and planted her flowers and hung her clothes on the line in back of the house. How could they think of shutting this down?

'Don't worry, Ben,' my father had said.

But I worried anyway.

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My father was right. Delta was not closed down and its activities were not curtailed in the slightest.

My father said: 'See?' A note of quiet triumph in his voice.

Now I know what he knew and couldn't tell me. Fort Delta wasn't closed because of Inner Delta. Keeping Fort Delta open had nothing to do with the special Economic Impact Statement ordered by the Department of Defense or the Presidential Decree based on the Impact Statement. It had nothing to do with editorials written in the newspapers or speeches made by congressmen in Washington. Inner Delta was the key. Inner Delta was the tail that wagged the dog, that nobody knew about but a few people, my father among them. And Inner Delta was the reason I ended up on the bridge and why a bullet created a tunnel in my chest and why I dream of screaming children at night.

Another picture postcard: My father. A general who does not want to be a general.

My father, the patriot.

I only saw him in uniform that one time when he summoned me to his office. He wore the stars and stood behind the desk and for a moment I didn't recognize him. I had a feeling he wasn't my father at all, that my father had ceased to exist and an actor was taking his place, an old actor like Gregory Peck on old television movies. My father

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said: 'Sit down, Benjamin.' It was all very strange and formal because he never called me Benjamin and I had never been in his office before. I could feel my heart beating heavily, like a Chinese gong in my chest, because this was an important occasion. I knew little about his work except that it was secret and my mother and I were not supposed to ask questions. I knew, however, that his work was very special and separate from the regular Fort Delta routine. How did I know? Slips of the tongue. Phone calls I overheard. My father often spoke in a sort of code, but I cracked some of the code. Like, on the phone, he'd say: 'Peripheral.' After a while, I realized that meant I was around someplace, on the edges, and he wasn't free to talk.

I also knew the nature of his profession but not its details. Psychological stuff, behavior intervention, whatever that means. I ran across an old university journal in which he wrote out his theories and although the stuff was mostly double-talk to me, I noted the introduction in which he was described as a pioneer in his field, worthy perhaps of a Nobel Prize someday. To complete the portrait: my father was a professor at New England University in Boston before he accepted the commission and took my mother and me to Fort Delta when I was, like, three years old.

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Anyway. I sat in the office and my father began to address me. Not talk to me but address me. As if I were not his son but a stranger who had suddenly become important to him. I hadn't connected my visit to the office with the bridge and the hostages until he began to talk. As he talked, I felt a drop of perspiration roll down from my armpit like a small cold marble. But at the same time I was happy and excited. Scared, too, of course, but somehow happy, knowing that I was suddenly a part of the secret life of my father.

No more room on this particular postcard.

Call it amnesia.

Emotional amnesia, maybe.

Or whatever the hell you wish.

Who the hell are you anyway, out there looking over my shoulder as I write this?

I feel you there, watching, waiting to get in.

Or is anybody there?

I once read the shortest horror story in the world. I don't know who wrote it.

It went something like this:

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The last person on earth sat in a room.

There came a knock at the door.

Who will knock at my door?

When he arrives, will my father be wearing his uniform? Check One: Yes _____ No _____ Unsure _____.

Will I be able to look him in the eye? Check One: Yes _____ No _____ Unsure _____.

Will he be able to look me in the eye? Check One: No _____ No _____ No _____.

Maybe I should make another and final trip to Brimmler's Bridge before he arrives.

And take that sweet plummet into nothingness as the wind whistles through the tunnel in my chest and the hole in my heart.

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