
Opening Extract from...

The Passage

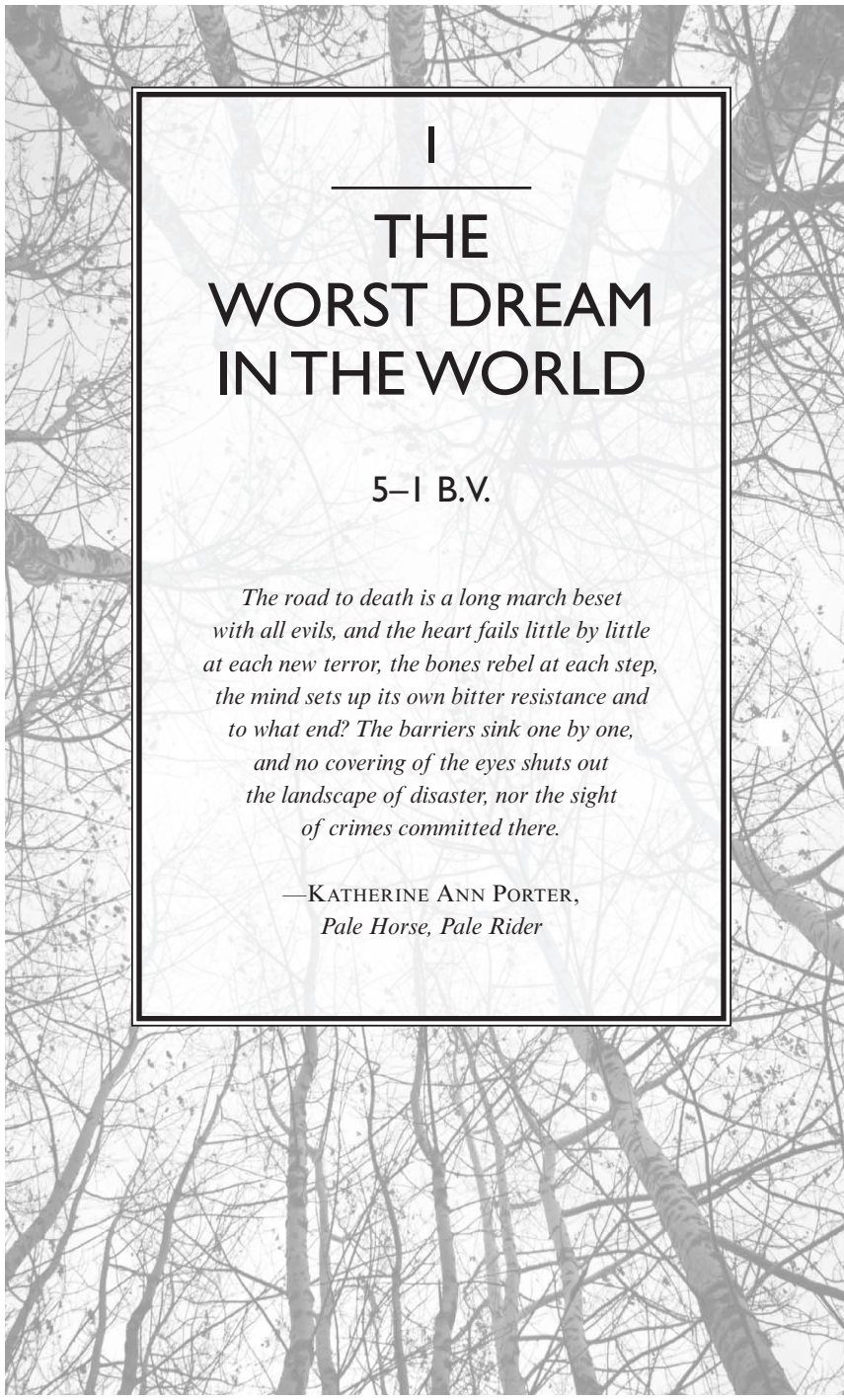
Written by Justin Cronin

Published by Orion

THE PASSAGE

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defac'd
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down-raz'd,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate
That Time will come and take my love away.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Sonnet 64



1

THE WORST DREAM IN THE WORLD

5–1 B.V.

The road to death is a long march beset
with all evils, and the heart fails little by little
at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step,
the mind sets up its own bitter resistance and
to what end? The barriers sink one by one,
and no covering of the eyes shuts out
the landscape of disaster, nor the sight
of crimes committed there.

—Katherine Ann Porter,
Pale Horse, Pale Rider

ONE

Before she became the Girl from Nowhere—the One Who Walked In, the First and Last and Only, who lived a thousand years—she was just a little girl in Iowa, named Amy. Amy Harper Bellafonte.

The day Amy was born, her mother, Jeanette, was nineteen years old. Jeanette named her baby Amy for her own mother, who'd died when Jeanette was little, and gave her the middle name Harper for Harper Lee, the lady who'd written *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Jeanette's favorite book—truth be told, the only book she'd made it all the way through in high school. She might have named her Scout, after the little girl in the story, because she wanted her little girl to grow up like that, tough and funny and wise, in a way that she, Jeanette, had never managed to be. But Scout was a name for a boy, and she didn't want her daughter to have to go around her whole life explaining something like that.

Amy's father was a man who came in one day to the restaurant where Jeanette had waited tables since she turned sixteen, a diner everyone called the Box, because it looked like one: like a big chrome shoe box sitting off the county road, backed by fields of corn and beans, nothing else around for miles except a self-serve car wash, the kind where you had to put coins into the machine and do all the work yourself. The man, whose name was Bill Reynolds, sold combines and harvesters, big things like that, and he was a sweet talker who told Jeanette as she poured his coffee and then later, again and again, how pretty she was, how he liked her coal-black hair and hazel eyes and slender wrists, said it all in a way that sounded like he meant it, not the way boys in school had, as if the words were just something that needed to get said along the way to her letting them do as they liked. He had a big car, a new Pontiac, with a dashboard that glowed like a spaceship and leather seats creamy as butter. She could have loved that man, she thought, really and truly loved him. But he stayed in town only a few days, and then went on his way. When she told her father what had happened, he said he wanted to go looking for him, make him live up to his responsibilities. But what Jeanette knew and didn't say was that Bill Reynolds was married, a married man; he had a family in Lincoln, all the way clean over in Nebraska. He'd even showed her the pictures in his wallet of his kids, two little boys in baseball uniforms, Bobby and Billy. So no

matter how many times her father asked who the man was that had done this to her, she didn't say. She didn't even tell him the man's name.

And the truth was, she didn't mind any of it, not really: not the being pregnant, which was easy right until the end, nor the delivery itself, which was bad but fast, nor, especially, having a baby, her little Amy. To tell Jeanette he'd decided to forgive her, her father had done up her brother's old bedroom as a nursery, carried down the old baby crib from the attic, the one Jeanette herself had slept in, years ago; he'd gone with Jeanette, in the last months before Amy came, to the Walmart to pick out some things she'd need, like pajamas and a little plastic tub and a wind-up mobile to hang over the crib. He'd read a book that said that babies needed things like that, things to look at so their little brains would turn on and begin to work properly. From the start Jeanette always thought of the baby as "her," because in her heart she wanted a girl, but she knew that wasn't the sort of thing you should say to anyone, not even to yourself. She'd had a scan at the hospital over in Cedar Falls and asked the woman, a lady in a flowered smock who was running the little plastic paddle over Jeanette's stomach, if she could tell which it was; but the woman laughed, looking at the pictures on the TV of Jeanette's baby, sleeping away inside her, and said, *Hon, this baby's shy. Sometimes you can tell and others you can't, and this is one of those times.* So Jeanette didn't know, which she decided was fine with her, and after she and her father had emptied out her brother's room and taken down his old pennants and posters—Jose Canseco, a music group called Killer Picnic, the Bud Girls—and seen how faded and banged up the walls were, they painted it a color the label on the can called "Dreamtime," which somehow was both pink and blue at once—good whatever the baby turned out to be. Her father hung a wallpaper border along the edge of the ceiling, a repeating pattern of ducks splashing in a puddle, and cleaned up an old maple rocking chair he'd found at the auction hall, so that when Jeanette brought the baby home, she'd have a place to sit and hold her.

The baby came in summer, the girl she'd wanted and named Amy Harper Bellafonte; there seemed no point in using the name Reynolds, the last name of a man Jeanette guessed she'd never see again and, now that Amy was here, no longer wanted to. And Bellafonte: you couldn't do better than a name like that. It meant "beautiful fountain," and that's what Amy was. Jeanette fed and rocked and changed her, and when Amy cried in the middle of the night because she was wet or hungry or didn't like the dark, Jeanette stumbled down the hall to her room, no matter what the hour was or how tired she felt from working at the Box, to pick her up and tell her she was there, she would always be there, you cry and I'll come run-

ning, that's a deal between us, you and me, forever and ever, my little Amy Harper Bellafonte. And she would hold and rock her until dawn began to pale the window shades and she could hear birds singing in the branches of the trees outside.

Then Amy was three and Jeanette was alone. Her father had died, a heart attack they told her, or else a stroke. It wasn't the kind of thing anyone needed to check. Whatever it was, it hit him early one winter morning as he was walking to his truck to drive to work at the elevator; he had just enough time to put down his coffee on the fender before he fell over and died, never spilling a drop. She still had her job at the Box, but the money wasn't enough now, not for Amy or any of it, and her brother, in the Navy somewhere, didn't answer her letters. *God invented Iowa,* he always said, *so people could leave it and never come back.* She wondered what she would do.

Then one day a man came into the diner. It was Bill Reynolds. He was different, somehow, and the change was no good. The Bill Reynolds she remembered—and she had to admit she still thought of him from time to time, about little things mostly, like the way his sandy hair flopped over his forehead when he talked, or how he blew over his coffee before he sipped it, even when it wasn't hot anymore—there was something about him, a kind of warm light from inside that you wanted to be near. It reminded her of those little plastic sticks that you snapped so the liquid inside made them glow. This was the same man, but the glow was gone. He looked older, thinner. She saw he hadn't shaved or combed his hair, which was greasy and standing all whichaway, and he wasn't wearing a pressed polo like before but just an ordinary work shirt like the ones her father had worn, untucked and stained under the arms. He looked like he'd spent all night out in the weather, or in a car somewhere. He caught her eye at the door and she followed him to a booth in back.

—*What are you doing here?*

—*I left her,* he said, and as he looked at where she stood, she smelled beer on his breath, and sweat, and dirty clothes. *I've gone and done it, Jeanette. I left my wife. I'm a free man.*

—*You drove all this way to tell me that?*

—*I've thought about you.* He cleared his throat. *A lot. I've thought about us.*

—*What us? There ain't no us. You can't come in like you're doing and say you've been thinking about us.*

He sat up straight. —*Well, I'm doing it. I'm doing it right now.*

—It's busy in here, can't you see that? I can't be talking to you like this. You'll have to order something.

—Fine, he answered, but he didn't look at the menu on the wall, just kept his eyes on her. *I'll have a cheeseburger. A cheeseburger and a Coke.*

As she wrote down the order and the words swam in her vision, she realized she had started to cry. She felt like she hadn't slept in a month, a year. The weight of exhaustion was held up only by the thinnest sliver of her will. There was a time when she'd wanted to do something with her life—cut hair, maybe, get her certificate, open a little shop, move to a real city, like Chicago or Des Moines, rent an apartment, have friends. She'd always held in her mind a picture of herself sitting in a restaurant, a coffee shop but nice; it was fall, and cold outside, and she was alone at a small table by the window, reading a book. On her table was a steaming mug of tea. She would look up to the window to see the people on the street of the city she was in, hustling to and fro in their heavy coats and hats, and see her own face there, too, reflected in the window, hovering over the image of all the people outside. But as she stood there, these ideas seemed like they belonged to a different person entirely. Now there was Amy, sick half the time with a cold or a stomach thing she'd gotten at the ratty day care where she spent the days while Jeanette was working at the Box, and her father dead just like that, so fast it was as if he'd fallen through a trapdoor on the surface of the earth, and Bill Reynolds sitting at the table like he'd just stepped out for a second, not four years.

—Why are you doing this to me?

He held her eyes with his own a long moment and touched the top of her hand.*—Meet me later. Please.*

He ended up living in the house with her and Amy. She couldn't say if she had invited him to do this or if it had just somehow happened. Either way, she was instantly sorry. This Bill Reynolds: who was he really? He'd left his wife and boys, Bobby and Billy in their baseball suits, all of it behind in Nebraska. The Pontiac was gone, and he had no job either; that had ended, too. The economy the way it was, he explained, nobody was buying a goddamn thing. He said he had a plan, but the only plan that she could see seemed to be him sitting in the house doing nothing for Amy or even cleaning up the breakfast dishes, while she worked all day at the Box. He hit her the first time after he'd been living there three months; he was drunk, and once he did it, he burst out crying and said, over and over, how sorry he was. He was on his knees, blubbering, like *she'd* done something to *him.* She had to understand, he was saying, how hard it all was, all the changes in his life, it was more than a man, any man, could take. He loved

her, he was sorry, nothing like that would happen again, ever. He *swore* it. Not to her and not to Amy. And in the end, she heard herself saying she was sorry too.

He'd hit her over money; when winter came, and she didn't have enough money in her checking account to pay the heating oil man, he hit her again.

—*Goddamnit, woman. Can't you see I'm in a situation here?*

She was on the kitchen floor, holding the side of her head. He'd hit her hard enough to lift her off her feet. Funny, now that she was down there she saw how dirty the floor was, filthy and stained, with clumps of dust and who-knew-what all rowed against the base of the cabinets where you couldn't usually see. Half her mind was noticing this while the other half said, You aren't thinking straight, Jeanette; Bill hit you and knocked a wire loose, so now you're worrying over the dust. Something funny was happening with the way the world sounded, too. Amy was watching television upstairs, on the little set in her room, but Jeanette could hear it like it was playing inside her head, Barney the purple dinosaur and a song about brushing your teeth; and then from far away, she heard the sound of the oil truck pulling away, its engine grinding as it turned out of the drive and headed down the county road.

—*It ain't your house,* she said.

—*You're right about that.* Bill took a bottle of Old Crow from over the sink and poured some in a jelly jar, though it was only ten o'clock in the morning. He sat at the table but didn't cross his legs like he meant to get comfortable. *Ain't my oil, either.*

Jeanette rolled over and tried to stand but couldn't. She watched him drink for a minute.

—*Get out.*

He laughed, shaking his head, and took a sip of whiskey.

—*That's funny,* he said. *You telling me that from the floor like you are.*

—*I mean what I say. Get out.*

Amy came into the room. She was holding the stuffed bunny she still carried everywhere, and wearing a pair of overalls, the good ones Jeanette had bought her at the outlet mall, the OshKosh B'Gosh, with the strawberries embroidered on the bib. One of the straps had come undone and was flopping at her waist. Jeanette realized Amy must have done this herself, because she had to go to the bathroom.

—*You're on the floor, Mama.*

—*I'm okay, honey.* She got to her feet to show her. Her left ear was ringing a little, like in a cartoon, birds flying around her head. She saw

there was a little blood, too, on her hand; she didn't know where this had come from. She picked Amy up and did her best to smile. *See? Mama just took a spill, that's all. You need to go, honey? You need to use the potty?*

—Look at you, Bill was saying. *Will you look at yourself?* He shook his head again and drank. *You stupid twat. She probably ain't even mine.*

—Mama, the girl said and pointed, *you cut yourself. Your nose is cut.*

And whether it was what she'd heard or the blood, the little girl began to cry.

—See what you done? Bill said, and to Amy, *Come on now. Ain't no big thing, sometimes folks argue, that's just how it is.*

—I'm telling you again, just leave.

—Then what would you do, tell me that. You can't even fill the oil tank.

—You think I don't know that? I sure as by God don't need you to tell me that.

Amy had begun to wail. Holding her, Jeanette felt the spread of hot moisture across her waist as the little girl released her bladder.

—For Pete's sake, shut that kid up.

She held Amy tight against her chest. *—You're right. She ain't yours. She ain't yours and never will be. You leave or I'm calling the sheriff, I swear.*

—Don't you do me like this, Jean. I mean it.

—Well, I'm doing it. That's just what I'm doing.

Then he was up and slamming through the house, taking his things, tossing them back into the cardboard cartons he'd used to carry them into the house, months ago. Why hadn't she thought it right then, how strange it was that he didn't even have a proper suitcase? She sat at the kitchen table holding Amy on her lap, watching the clock over the stove and counting off the minutes until he returned to the kitchen to hit her again.

But then she heard the front door swing open, and his heavy footsteps on the porch. He went in and out awhile, carrying the boxes, leaving the front door open so cold air spilled through the house. Finally he came into the kitchen, tracking snow, leaving little patches of it waffled to the floor with the soles of his boots.

—Fine. Fine. You want me to leave? You watch me. He took the bottle of Old Crow from the table. *Last chance,* he said.

Jeanette said nothing, didn't even look at him.

—So that's how it is. Fine. You mind I have one for the road?

Which was when Jeanette reached out and swatted his glass across the kitchen, smacked it with her open hand like a ping-pong ball with a paddle. She knew she was going to do this for about half a second before she did, knowing it wasn't the best idea she'd ever had, but by then it was too late. The glass hit the wall with a hollow thud and fell to the floor, unbro-

ken. She closed her eyes, holding Amy tight, knowing what would come. For a moment the sound of the glass rolling on the floor seemed to be the only thing in the room. She could feel Bill's anger rising off him like waves of heat.

—*You just see what the world has in store for you, Jeanette. You remember I said that.*

Then his footsteps carried him out of the room and he was gone.

She paid the oil man what she could and turned the thermostat down to fifty, to make it last. *See, Amy honey, it's like a big camping trip we're on,* she said as she stuffed the little girl's hands into mittens and wedged a hat onto her head. *There now, it's not so cold, not really. It's like an adventure.* They slept together under a pile of old quilts, the room so icy their breath fogged the air over their faces. She took a job at night, cleaning up at the high school, leaving Amy with a neighbor lady, but when the woman took sick and had to go into the hospital, Jeanette had to leave Amy alone. She explained to Amy what to do: stay in bed, don't answer the door, just close your eyes and I'll be home before you know it. She'd make sure Amy was asleep before creeping out the door, then stride quickly down the snow-crusted drive to where she'd parked her car, away from the house, so Amy wouldn't hear it turning over.

But then she made the mistake one night of telling someone about this, another woman on the work crew, when the two of them had stepped out for a smoke. Jeanette had never liked smoking at all and didn't want to spend the money, but the cigarettes helped her stay awake, and without a smoke break there was nothing to look forward to, just more toilets to scrub and halls to be mopped. She told the woman, whose name was Alice, not to tell anyone, she knew she could get in trouble leaving Amy alone like that, but of course that's just what Alice did; she went straight to the superintendent, who fired Jeanette on the spot. *Leaving a child like that ain't right,* he told her in his office by the boilers, a room no bigger than ten feet square with a dented metal desk and an old easy chair with the plush popping out and a calendar on the wall that wasn't even the right year; the air was always so hot and close in there Jeanette could barely breathe. He said, *You count your lucky stars I'm not calling the county on you.* She wondered when she'd become someone a person could say this to and not be wrong. He'd been nice enough to her until then, and maybe she could have made him understand the situation, that without the money from cleaning she didn't know what she'd do, but she was too tired to find the words. She took her last check and drove home in her crappy old car, the Kia she'd

bought in high school when it was already six years old and falling apart so fast she could practically see the nuts and bolts bouncing on the pavement in her rearview mirror; and when she stopped at the Quick Mart to buy a pack of Capris and then the engine wouldn't start up again, she started to cry. She couldn't make herself stop crying for half an hour.

The problem was the battery; a new one cost her eighty-three dollars at Sears, but by then she'd missed a week of work and lost her job at the Box, too. She had just enough money left to leave, packing up their things in a couple of grocery sacks and the cartons Bill had left behind.

No one ever knew what became of them. The house sat empty; the pipes froze and split like bursting fruit. When spring came, the water poured from them for days and days until the utility company, realizing nobody was paying the bill, sent a couple of men to turn it off. The mice moved in, and when an upstairs window was broken in a summer thunderstorm, the swallows; they built their nests in the bedroom where Jeanette and Amy had slept in the cold, and soon the house was filled with the sound and smell of birds.

In Dubuque, Jeanette worked the night shift at a gas station, Amy sleeping on the sofa in the back room, until the owner found out and sent her packing. It was summer, they were living in the Kia, using the washroom behind the station to clean up, so leaving was just a matter of driving away. For a time they stayed with a friend of Jeanette's in Rochester, a girl she'd known in school who'd gone up there for a nursing degree; Jeanette took a job mopping floors at the same hospital where the friend worked, but the pay was just minimum wage, and the friend's apartment was too small for them to stay; she moved into a motel, but there was no one to look after Amy, the friend couldn't do it and didn't know anyone who could, and they ended up living in the Kia again. It was September; already a chill was in the air. The radio spoke all day of war. She drove south, getting as far as Memphis before the Kia gave out for good.

The man who picked them up in the Mercedes said his name was John—a lie, she guessed, from the way he said it, like a child telling a story about who broke the lamp, sizing her up for a second before he spoke. *My name is . . . John.* She guessed he was fifty, but she wasn't a good judge of these things. He had a well-trimmed beard and was wearing a tight dark suit, like a funeral director. While he drove he kept glancing at Amy in the rearview mirror, adjusting himself in his seat, asking Jeanette questions about herself, where she was going, the kinds of things she liked to do,

what had brought her to the Great State of Tennessee. The car reminded her of Bill Reynolds's Grand Prix, only nicer. With the windows closed you could barely hear anything outside, and the seats were so soft she felt like she was sitting in a dish of ice cream. She felt like falling asleep. By the time they pulled into the motel she hardly cared what was going to happen. It seemed inevitable. They were near the airport; the land was flat, like Iowa, and in the twilight she could see the lights of the planes circling the field, moving in slow, sleepy arcs like targets in a shooting gallery.

Amy, honey, Mama's going to go inside with this nice man for a minute, okay? You just look at your picture book, honey.

He was polite enough, going about his business, calling her baby and such, and before he left he put fifty dollars on the nightstand—enough for Jeanette to buy a room for the night for her and Amy.

But others weren't as nice.

During the night, she'd lock Amy in the room with the TV on to make some noise and walk out to the highway in front of the motel and just kind of stand there, and it didn't take long. Somebody would stop, always a man, and once they'd worked things out, she'd take him back to the motel. Before she let the man inside she'd go into the room by herself and carry Amy to the bathroom, where she'd made a bed for her in the tub out of some extra blankets and pillows.

Amy was six. She was quiet, barely talked most of the time, but she'd taught herself to read some, from looking at the same books over and over, and could do her numbers. One time they were watching *Wheel of Fortune,* and when the time came for the woman to spend the money she'd won, the little girl knew just what she could buy, that she couldn't afford the vacation to Cancún but could have the living room set with enough money left over for the his-and-her golf clubs. Jeanette thought it was probably smart of Amy to figure this out, maybe more than smart, and she guessed she should probably be in school, but Jeanette didn't know where there were any schools around there. It was all auto-body-repair and pawn shops and motels like the one they lived in, the SuperSix. The owner was a man who looked a lot like Elvis Presley, not the handsome young one but the old fat one with the sweaty hair and chunky gold glasses that made his eyes look like fish swimming in a tank, and he wore a satin jacket with a lightning bolt down the back, just like Elvis had. Mostly he just sat at his desk behind the counter, playing solitaire and smoking a little cigar with a plastic tip. Jeanette paid him in cash each week for the room and if she

threw in an extra fifty he didn't bother her any. One day he asked her if she had anything for protection, if maybe she wanted to buy a gun from him. She said sure, how much, and he told her another hundred. He showed her a rusty-looking little revolver, a .22, and when she put it in her hand right there in the office it didn't seem like much at all, let alone something that could shoot a person. But it was small enough to fit in the purse she carried out to the highway and she didn't think it would be a bad thing to have around. *—Careful where you point that,* the manager said, and Jeanette said, *Okay, if you're afraid of it, it must work. You sold yourself a gun.*

And she was glad she had it. Just knowing it was in her purse made her realize she'd been afraid before and now wasn't, or at least not so much. The gun was like a secret, the secret of who she was, like she was carrying the last bit of herself in her purse. The other Jeanette, the one who stood on the highway in her stretchy top and skirt, who cocked her hip and smiled and said, *What you want, baby? There something I can help you with tonight?*—that Jeanette was a made-up person, like a woman in a story she wasn't sure she wanted to know the end of.

The man who picked her up the night it happened wasn't the one she would have thought. The bad ones you could usually tell right off, and sometimes she said no thanks and just kept walking. But this one looked nice, a college boy she guessed, or at least young enough to go to college, and nicely dressed, wearing crisp khaki pants and one of those shirts with the little man on the horse swinging the hammer. He looked like someone going on a date, which made her laugh to herself when she got into the car, a big Ford Expo with a rack on the top for a bike or something else.

But then a funny thing happened. He wouldn't drive to the motel. Some men wanted her to do them right there, in the car, not even bothering to pull over, but when she started in on this, thinking that was what he wanted, he pushed her gently away. He wanted to take her out, he said. She asked, *What do you mean, out?*

—Someplace nice, he explained. *Wouldn't you rather go someplace nice? I'll pay you more than whatever you usually get.*

She thought about Amy sleeping back in the room and guessed it wouldn't make much difference, one way or the other. *As long as it ain't more than an hour,* she said. *Then you got to take me back.*

But it was more than an hour, a lot more; by the time they got where they were going, Jeanette was afraid. He pulled up to a house with a big sign over the porch showing three shapes that looked almost like letters but not quite, and Jeanette knew what it was: a fraternity. Some place a

bunch of rich boys lived and got drunk on their daddy's money, pretending to go to school to become doctors and lawyers.

—*You'll like my friends,* he said. *Come on, I want you to meet them.*

—*I ain't going in there,* she said. *You take me back now.*

He paused, both hands on the wheel, and when she saw his face and what was in his eyes, the slow mad hunger, he suddenly didn't look like such a nice boy anymore.

—*That,* he said, *is not an option. I'd have to say that's not on the menu just now.*

—*The hell it ain't.*

She threw the door of the truck open and made to walk away, never mind she didn't know where she was, but then he was out too, and he grabbed her by the arm. It was pretty clear now what was waiting inside the house, what he wanted, how everything was going to shape up. It was her fault for not understanding this before—long before, maybe as far back as the Box on the day Bill Reynolds had come in. She realized the boy was afraid, too—that somebody was making him do this, the friends inside the house, or it felt like it to him, anyway. But she didn't care. He got behind her and tried to get his arm around her neck to lock her with his elbow, and she hit him, hard, where it counted, with the back of her fist, which made him yell, calling her bitch and whore and all the rest, and strike her across the face. She lost her balance and fell backward, and then he was on top of her, his legs astride her waist like a jockey riding a horse, slapping and hitting, trying to pin her arms. Once he did this it would all be over. He probably wouldn't care if she was conscious or not, she thought, when he did it; none of them would. She reached into her purse where it lay on the grass. Her life was so strange to her it didn't seem like it was even her own anymore, if it had ever been hers to begin with. But everything made sense to a gun. A gun knew what it was, and she felt the cool metal of the revolver slide into her palm, like it wanted to be there. Her mind said, *Don't think, Jeanette,* and she pushed the barrel against the side of the boy's head, feeling the skin and bone where it pressed against him, figuring that was close enough she couldn't miss, and then she pulled the trigger.

It took her the rest of the night to get home. After the boy had fallen off her, she'd run as fast as she could to the biggest road she could see, a wide boulevard glowing under streetlights, just in time to grab a bus. She didn't know if there was blood on her clothes or what, but the driver hardly

looked at her as he explained how to get back to the airport, and she sat in the back where no one could see. In any case, the bus was almost empty. She had no idea where she was; the bus inched along through neighborhoods of houses and stores, all dark, past a big church and then signs for the zoo, and finally entered downtown, where she stood in a Plexiglas shelter, shivering in the damp, and waited for a second bus. She'd lost her watch somehow and didn't know the time. Maybe it had come off somehow when they were fighting and the police could use it as a clue. But it was just a Timex she'd bought at Walgreens, and she thought it couldn't tell them much. The gun was what would do it; she'd tossed it on the lawn, or so she remembered. Her hand was still a little numb from the force of it going off in her fist, the bones chiming like a tuning fork that wouldn't stop.

By the time she reached the motel the sun was rising; she felt the city waking up. Under the ashy light, she let herself into the room. Amy was asleep with the television still on, an infomercial for some kind of exercise machine. A muscled man with a ponytail and huge, doglike mouth was barking silently out of the screen. Jeanette figured she didn't have much more than a couple of hours before somebody came. That was dumb of her, leaving the gun behind, but there wasn't any point worrying over that now. She splashed some water on her face and brushed her teeth, not looking at herself in the mirror, then changed into jeans and a T-shirt and took her old clothes, the little skirt and stretchy top and fringed jacket she'd worn to the highway, streaked with blood and bits of things she didn't want to know about, behind the motel to the reeking dumpster, where she shoved them in.

It seemed as if time had compressed somehow, like an accordion; all the years she had lived and everything that had happened to her were suddenly squeezed below the weight of this one moment. She remembered the early mornings when Amy was just a baby, how she'd held and rocked her by the window, often falling asleep herself. Those had been good mornings, something she'd always remember. She packed a few things into Amy's Powerpuff Girls knapsack and some clothing and money into a grocery sack for herself. Then she turned off the television and gently shook Amy awake.

"Come on, honey. Wake up now. We got to go."

The little girl was half asleep but allowed Jeanette to dress her. She was always like this in the morning, dazed and sort of out of it, and Jeanette was glad it wasn't some other time of day, when she'd have to do more coaxing and explaining. She gave the girl a cereal bar and a can of

warm grape pop to drink, and then the two of them went out to the highway where the bus had let Jeanette off.

She remembered seeing, on the ride back to the motel, the big stone church with its sign out front: OUR LADY OF SORROWS. If she did the buses right, she figured, they'd go right by there again.

She sat with Amy in the back, an arm around her shoulders to hold her close. The little girl said nothing, except once to say she was hungry again, and Jeanette took another cereal bar from the box she'd put in Amy's knapsack, with the clean clothing and the toothbrush and Amy's Peter Rabbit. Amy, she thought, you are my good girl, my very good girl, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. They changed buses downtown again and rode for another thirty minutes, and when Jeanette saw the sign for the zoo she wondered if she'd gone too far; but then she remembered that the church had been before the zoo, so it would be after the zoo now, going the other direction.

Then she saw it. In daylight it looked different, not as big, but it would do. They exited through the rear door, and Jeanette zipped up Amy's jacket and put the knapsack on her while the bus pulled away.

She looked and saw the other sign then, the one she remembered from the night before, hanging on a post at the edge of a driveway that ran beside the church: CONVENT OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY.

She took Amy's hand and walked up the driveway. It was lined with huge trees, some kind of oak, with long mossy arms that draped over the two of them. She didn't know what a convent would look like but it turned out to be just a house, though nice: made of stone that glinted a little, with a shingled roof and white trim around the windows. There was an herb garden out front, and she thought that must be what the nuns did, they must come out here and take care of tiny growing things. She stepped up to the front door and rang the bell.

The woman who answered wasn't an old lady, like Jeanette had imagined, and she wasn't wearing a robe, whatever those things were called. She was young, not much older than Jeanette, and except for the veil on her head was dressed like anybody else, in a skirt and blouse and a pair of brown penny loafers. She was also black. Before she'd left Iowa, Jeanette had never seen but one or two black people in her life, except on television and in the movies. But Memphis was crawling with them. She knew some folks had problems with them, but Jeanette hadn't so far, and she guessed a black nun would do all right.

"Sorry to bother you," Jeanette began. "My car broke down out there on the street, and I was wondering—"

"Of course," the woman said. Her voice was strange, like nothing Jeanette had ever heard, like there were notes of music caught and ringing inside the words. "Come in, come in, both of you."

The woman stepped back from the door to let Jeanette and Amy into the front hall. Somewhere in the building, Jeanette knew, there were other nuns—maybe they were black, too—sleeping or cooking or reading or praying, which she guessed nuns did a lot of, maybe most of the day. It was quiet enough, so she supposed that was probably right. What she had to do now was get the woman to leave her and Amy alone. She knew that as a fact, the way she knew she'd killed a boy last night, and all the rest of it. What she was about to do hurt more, but it wasn't any different otherwise, just more pain on the same spot.

"Miss—?"

"Oh, you can just call me Lacey," the woman said. "We're pretty informal around here. Is this your little girl?" She knelt in front of Amy. "Hello there, what's your name? I have a little niece about your age, almost as pretty as you." She looked up at Jeanette. "Your daughter is very shy. Perhaps it is my accent. You see, I am from Sierra Leone, west Africa." She turned to Amy again and took her hand. "Do you know where that is? It is very far away."

"All these nuns from there?" Jeanette asked.

Standing, the woman laughed, showing her bright teeth. "Oh, goodness no! I'm afraid I am the only one."

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Jeanette liked this woman, liked listening to her voice. She liked how she was with Amy, the way she looked at her eyes when she talked to her.

"I was racing to get her to school, you see," Jeanette said, "when that old car of mine? The thing just kind of gave out."

The woman nodded. "Please. This way."

She led Jeanette and Amy through the hallway to the kitchen, a big room with a huge oak dining table and cabinets with labels on them: CHINA, CANNED GOODS, PASTA AND RICE. Jeanette had never thought about nuns eating before. She guessed that with all the nuns living in the building, it helped to know what was where in the kitchen. The woman pointed to the phone, an old brown one with a long cord, hanging on the wall. Jeanette had planned the next part well enough. She dialed a number while the woman got a plate of cookies for Amy—not store-bought, but something somebody had actually baked—then, as the recorded voice on the other end told her that it would be cloudy today with a high temperature of fifty-five degrees and a chance of showers moving in toward evening, she pretended to talk to AAA, nodding along.

"Wrecker's coming," she said, hanging the phone back up. "Said to go outside and meet him. Said he's got a man just around the corner, in fact."

"Well, that's good news," the woman said brightly. "Today is your lucky day. If you wish, you can leave your daughter here with me. It would be no good to manage her on a busy street."

So there it was. Jeanette wouldn't have to do anything else. All she had to do was say yes.

"Ain't no bother?"

The woman smiled again. "We'll be fine here. Won't we?" She looked encouragingly at Amy. "See? She is perfectly happy. You go see to your car."

Amy was sitting on one of the chairs at the big oak table, with an untouched plate of cookies and a glass of milk before her. She'd taken off her backpack and was cradling it in her lap. Jeanette looked at her as long as she would let herself, and then she knelt and hugged her.

"You be good now," she said, and against her shoulder, Amy nodded. Jeanette meant to say something else, but couldn't find the words. She thought about the note she'd left inside the knapsack, the slip of paper they were sure to find when Jeanette never came back to get her. She hugged her as long as she dared. The feeling of Amy was all around her, the warmth of her body, the smell of her hair and skin. Jeanette knew she was about to cry, something the woman—Lucy? Lacey?—couldn't see, but she let herself hold Amy a moment longer, trying to put this feeling in a place inside her mind, someplace safe where she could keep it. Then she let her daughter go, and before anybody said another word, Jeanette walked from the kitchen and down the driveway to the street, and then kept right on going.

TWO

From the computer files of Jonas Abbott Lear, PhD
Professor, Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology,
Harvard University
Assigned to United States Army Medical Research Institute
of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID)
Department of Paleovirology, Fort Detrick, MD

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Monday, February 6 1:18 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Satellite linkage is up

Paul,

Greetings from the jungles of Bolivia, landlocked armpit of the Andes. From where you sit in frigid Cambridge, watching the snow fall, I'm sure a month in the tropics doesn't sound like a bad deal. But believe me: this is not St. Bart's. Yesterday I saw a snake the size of a submarine.

The trip down was uneventful—sixteen hours in the air to La Paz, then a smaller government transport to Concepción, in the country's eastern jungle basin. From here, there aren't really any decent roads; it's pure backcountry, and we'll be traveling on foot. Everybody on the team is pretty excited, and the roster keeps growing. In addition to the group from UCLA, Tim Fanning from Columbia caught up with us in La Paz, as did Claudia Swenson from MIT. (I think you told me once that you knew her at Yale.) In addition to his not inconsiderable star power, you'll be happy to hear that Tim brought half a dozen grad assistants with him, so just like that, the average age of the team fell by about ten years and the gender balance tipped decidedly toward the female. "Terrific scientists, every one," Tim insisted. Three ex-wives, each younger than the last; the guy never learns.

I have to say, despite my misgivings (and, of course, yours and Rochelle's) about involving the military, it's made a huge difference. Only USAMRIID has the muscle and the money to pull together a team like this one, and do it in a month. After years of trying to get people to

listen, I feel like a door has suddenly swung open, and all we have to do is step through it. You know me, I'm a scientist through and through; I don't have a superstitious bone in my body. But part of me just has to think it's fate. After Liz's illness, her long struggle, how ironic that I should finally have the chance to solve the greatest mystery of all—the mystery of death itself. I think she would have liked it here, actually. I can just see her, wearing that big straw hat of hers, sitting on a log by the river to read her beloved Shakespeare in the sunshine.

BTW: congrats on the tenure decision. Just before I left, I heard the committee voted you in by general acclaim, which didn't surprise me after the department vote, which I can't tell you about but which, off the record, was unanimous. I can't tell you how relieved I am. Never mind that you're the best biochemist we've got, a man who can make a microtubule cycloskeletal protein stand up and sing the "Hallelujah Chorus." What would I have done on my lunch hour if my squash partner hadn't gotten tenure?

My love to Rochelle, and tell Alex his uncle Jonas will bring him back something special from Bolivia. How about a baby anaconda? I hear they make good pets as long as you keep them fed. And I hope we're still on for the Sox opener. How you got those tickets I have no idea.

—Jonas

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Wednesday, February 8 8:00 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Re: Go get 'em, tiger

Paul,

Thanks for your message, and of course for your very sage advice re: pretty female postdocs with Ivy League degrees. I can't say I disagree with you, and on more than one lonely night in my tent, the thought has crossed my mind. But it's just not in the cards. For now, Rochelle is the only woman for me, and you can tell her I said so.

The news here, and I can already hear a big "I told you so" from Rochelle: it looks like we've been militarized. I suppose this was inevitable, at least since I took USAMRIID's money. (And we're talking about a lot of money—aerial recon doesn't come cheap: twenty thousand bucks to retarget a satellite, and that will buy you only thirty minutes worth.) But still, it seems like overkill. We were making our final

preparations for departure yesterday when a helicopter dropped out of the sky at base camp and who should step off but a squad of Special Forces, all done up like they were ready to take an enemy pillbox: the jungle camo, the green and black warpaint, the infrared scopes and high-power gas-recoil M-19s—all of it. Some very gung ho guys. Trailing the pack is a man in a suit, a civilian, who looks to be in charge. He struts across the field to where I'm standing and I see how young he is, not even thirty. He's also as tan as a tennis pro. What's he doing with a squad of special ops? "You the vampire guy?" he asks me. You know how I feel about that word, Paul—just try to get an NAS grant with "vampire" anywhere in the paperwork. But just to be polite, and because, what the hell, he's backed by enough firepower to overthrow a small government, I tell him, sure, that's me. "Mark Cole, Dr. Lear," he says, and shakes my hand, wearing a big grin. "I've come a long way just to meet you. Guess what? You're now a major." I'm thinking, a major what? And what are these guys doing here? "This is a civilian scientific expedition," I tell him. "Not anymore," he says. "Who decided this?" I ask. And he tells me, "My boss, Dr. Lear." "Who's your boss?" I ask him. And he says, "Dr. Lear, my boss is the president of the United States."

Tim was plenty ticked off, because he only gets to be a captain. I wouldn't know a captain from Colonel Sanders, so it's all the same to me. It was Claudia who really kicked up a fuss. She actually threatened to pack up and go home. "I didn't vote for that guy and I'm not going to be part of his damned army, no matter what the twerp says." Never mind that none of us voted for him either, and the whole thing really seems like a big joke. But it turns out she's a Quaker. Her younger brother was actually a conscientious objector during the Iran War. In the end, though, we calmed her down and got her to stay on, so long as we promised she didn't have to salute anyone.

The thing is, I can't really figure out why these guys are here. Not why the military would take an interest, because after all, it's their money we're spending, and I'm grateful for it. But why send a squad of special ops (they're technically "special reconnaissance") to babysit a bunch of biochemists? The kid in the suit—I'd guess he's NSA, though who really knows?—told me that the area we were traveling into was known to be controlled by the Montoya drug cartel and the soldiers are here for our protection. "How would it look for a team of American scientists to get themselves killed by drug lords in Bolivia?" he asked me. "Not a happy day for U.S. foreign policy, not a happy day at all." I didn't contradict him, but I know damn well there's no drug activity where we're going—

it's all to the west, on the altiplano. The eastern basin is virtually uninhabited except for a few scattered Indian settlements, most of which haven't had any outside contact in years. All of which he *knows* I know.

This has me scratching my head, but as far as I can tell, it makes no difference to the expedition itself. We just have some heavy firepower coming along for the ride. The soldiers pretty much keep to themselves; I've barely heard any of them even open their mouths. Spooky, but at least they don't get in the way.

Anyway, we're off in the morning. The offer of a pet snake still stands.

—Jonas

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Wednesday, February 15 11:32 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: See attached
Attachment: DSC00392.JPG (596 KB)

Paul,

Six days in. Sorry to be out of touch, and please tell Rochelle not to worry. It's been hard slogging every step of the way, with dense tree cover and many days of constant rain—too much work to get the satcom up. At night, we all eat like farmhands and fall exhausted into our tents. Nobody here smells very nice, either.

But tonight I'm too keyed up to sleep. The attachment will explain why. I've always believed in what we were doing, but of course I've had my moments of doubt, sleepless nights when I wondered if this was all completely harebrained, some kind of fantasy my brain cooked up when Liz became so sick. I know you've thought it too. So I'd be a fool not to question my own motives. But not anymore.

According to the GPS, we're still a good twenty kilometers from the site. The topography is consistent with the satellite recon—dense jungle plain, but along the river, a deep ravine with cliffs of limestone pocketed with caves. Even an amateur geologist could read these cliffs like the pages of a book. The usual layers of river sediment, and then, about four meters below the lip, a line of charcoal black. It's consistent with the Chuchote legend: a thousand years ago the whole area was blackened by fire, "a great conflagration sent by the god Auxl, lord of the Sun, to

destroy the demons of man and save the world." We camped on the riverbank last night, listening to the flocks of bats that poured out of the caves at sunset; in the morning, we headed east along the ravine.

It was just past noon when we saw the statue.

At first I thought maybe I was imagining things. But look at the image, Paul. A human being, but not quite: the bent animal posture, the clawlike hands and the long teeth crowding the mouth, the intense muscularity of the torso, details still visible, somehow, after—how long? How many centuries of wind and rain and sun have passed, wearing the stone away? And still it took my breath away. And the resemblance to the other images I've shown you is inarguable—the pillars at the temple of Mansarha, the carvings on the gravesite in Xianyang, the cave drawings in Côtes d'Amor.

More bats tonight. You get used to them, and they keep the mosquitoes down. Claudia rigged up a trap to catch one. Apparently, bats like canned peaches, which she used as bait. Maybe Alex would like a pet bat instead?

—J

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Saturday, February 18 6:51 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: more jpgs
Attachment: DSC00481.JPG (596 KB), DSC00486 (582 KB), DSC00491 (697 KB)

Have a look at these. We've counted nine figures now.

Cole thinks we're being followed, but won't tell me by who. It's just a feeling, he says. All night long he's on the satcom, won't tell me what it's all about. At least he's stopped calling me Major. He's a youngster, but not as green as he looks.

Good weather, finally. We're close, within 10K, making good time.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Sunday, February 19 9:51 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 1:16 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

Paul,

I'm writing this to you in case I don't make it back. I don't want to alarm you, but I have to be realistic about the situation. We're less than five kilometers from the grave site, but I doubt we'll be able to perform the extraction as planned. Too many of us are sick, or dead.

Two nights ago we were attacked—not by drug traffickers, but bats. They came a few hours after sunset while most of us were out of our tents doing the evening chores, scattered around the campsite. It was as if they had been scouting us all along, waiting for the right moment to launch an aerial assault. I was lucky: I had walked a few hundred yards upriver, away from the trees, to find a good signal on the GPS. I heard the shouts and then the gunfire, but by the time I made it back the swarm had moved downstream. Four people died that night, including Claudia. The bats simply engulfed her. She tried to get to the river—I guess she thought she could shake them off that way—but she never made it. By the time we reached her, she'd lost so much blood she had no chance. In the chaos, six others were bitten or scratched, and all of them are now ill with what looks like some speeded-up version of Bolivian hemorrhagic fever—bleeding from the mouth and nose, the skin and eyes rosy with burst capillaries, the fever shooting skyward, fluid filling the lungs, coma. We've been in contact with the CDC but without tissue analysis it's

anybody's guess. Tim had both his hands practically chewed to pieces, trying to pull them off Claudia. He's the sickest of the lot. I seriously doubt he'll last till morning.

Last night they came again. The soldiers had set up a defense perimeter, but there were simply too many—they must have come by the hundreds of thousands, a huge swarm that blotted out the stars. Three soldiers killed, as well as Cole. He was standing right in front of me; they actually lifted him off his feet before they bored through him like hot knives through butter. There was barely enough of him left to bury.

Tonight it's quiet, not a bat in the sky. We've built a fire line around the camp, and that seems to be keeping them at bay. Even the soldiers are pretty shaken up. The few of us who are left are now deciding what to do. A lot of our equipment has been destroyed; it's unclear how this happened, but sometime during the attack last night, a grenade belt went into the fire, killing one of the soldiers and taking out the generator as well as most of what was in the supply tent. But we still have satcom and enough juice in the batteries to call for evac. Probably we should all just get the hell out of here.

And yet. When I ask myself why I should turn back now, what I have to go home to, I can't think of a single reason. It would be different if Liz were still alive. I think for the past year some part of me has been pretending that she'd simply gone away for a while, that one day I'd look up and see her standing in the door, smiling that way she did, her head cocked to the side so her hair could fall away from her face; my Liz, home at last, thirsty for a cup of Earl Grey, ready for a stroll by the Charles through the falling snow. But I know now that this isn't going to happen. Strangely, the events of the last two days have given my mind a kind of clarity about what we're doing, what the stakes are. I'm not one bit sorry to be here; I don't feel afraid at all. If push comes to shove, I may press on alone.

Paul, whatever happens, whatever I decide, I want you to know that you have been a great friend to me. More than a friend: a brother. How strange to write that sentence, sitting on a riverbank in the jungles of Bolivia, four thousand miles away from everything and everyone I've ever known and loved. I feel as if I've entered a new era of my life. What strange places our lives can carry us to, what dark passages.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 5:31 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Re: don't be dumb, get the hell out, please

Paul,

We radioed for the evac last night. Pickup in ten hours, which is the nick of time as far as everyone's concerned. I don't see how we can survive another night here. Those of us who are still healthy have decided we can use the day to press on to the site. We were going to draw straws, but it turned out everyone wanted to go. We leave within the hour, at first light. Maybe something can still be salvaged from this disaster. One bit of good news: Tim seems to have turned a corner during the last few hours. His fever's way down, and though he's still unresponsive, the bleeding has stopped and his skin looks better. With the others, though, I'd say it's still touch and go.

I know that science is your god, Paul, but would it be too much to ask for you to pray for us? All of us.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 11:16 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

Now I know why the soldiers are here.