

Chapter 1

I woke up sweaty and shaking. Tense. I had been dreaming in black and white again. Always a bad sign.

I looked at the clock display on my VCR, but the glowing blue numbers just flashed

—00:00—

—00:00—

—00:00—

Time unstuck and drifting. That lost feeling, like when you're a kid with a fever and the night breaks around you forever.

I lay on my dingy mattress in my tiny living room, body humming with the premonition of something terrible about to happen. That copper taste in my mouth. Eyes wide in the darkness. Waiting.

The phone rang and I grabbed for it. “Hello?”

“DK?”

“Who the hell is this?” Nobody had called me DK in ten years, not since my cousin AJ died. DK had been her nickname for me.

"It's your cousin, Tom. Tom Hanlon. My dad married your Aunt Dot's half-sister."

I dredged up a vague memory of a strident woman in puffball hair lecturing my Uncle Waylon on the evils of drink while he sipped Coors Lite from a paper cup. "Okay. I think I got it."

"Now we're talking," Tom Hanlon said. "Do you remember me at all?"

"Not at all."

"We talked at that one family reunion. I asked you what ghosts were like."

"What did I say?"

"Dead."

That sounded like me. There are other things to say about ghosts, of course. They're all different, like demons, not all the same, like zombies. Some can touch you and some can't, some are sad and some are mad as hell. The main thing is, they all want *something*, and they want it way worse than you want anything. If you've got the sense God gave a cockroach, you stay the hell away from dead people.

Just to be polite I said, "Tom, are you aware that it's the fucking middle of the night?"

"There's a dead girl in my garage."

"Call the cops."

"No, not dead like that. I mean, more dead."

Oh. "Shit, man. Can't help you. I don't do that anymore. Good ni—"

"I'll give you a thousand bucks," he said. "Think about it."

I thought about it.

“A thousand dollars, just to get rid of one ghost. That’s a lot of money.”

One thousand dollars. Six thousand packages of Ichi-Ban noodle soup. Lunch at my current lifestyle for about... fourteen years. Ten good trips to Six Flags for me and Megan, Dr Peppers included and all the Frito Pie we could eat.

“I notice you aren’t hanging up,” Hanlon said with a tired laugh. “You know what they say, every man has his price—”

I hung up.

#

Six hours later I was out on my every-second Sunday visit with my twelve year-old daughter, Megan. Megan is short and fast and scrappy, not only the captain of her soccer team, but the only girl in the entire Greater Houston AYSO to get a red card this year. “Great eyes, ref!” she had said after a terrible no-call, clapping sarcastically and paying no attention to the blood dribbling from her split lip.

That's my daughter.

If she got a certain streak of cussedness from me, Meg inherited from her mother her blond hair, her athleticism, and—thank God—a complete inability to see the dead. I never told Megan about me and ghosts. No kid wants to think her daddy is a freak.

I don’t drive, so Megan and I take the bus when we go out, which she is beginning to think is lame. Today we'd spent an hour bumming around the Cactus Records on Shepherd listening to the free tracks. My current shitty job was at PetCo, and on my budget, free was good. This had been a reliable outing even six months ago, but this time Meg was so obviously unimpressed that I decided to spring for a root beer float at the 59 Diner to salvage the afternoon, only to hear Meg say that she was trying not to drink extra calories.

Jesus.

"You're too young to give up beer," I said.

She rolled her eyes.

The bus ride back to her house in Woodland was long and awkward. Woodland is a professional suburb on the north side of Houston, all carefully manicured pine trees and midscale housing developments. Even the Taco Bells are clean and neat.

"So, how are Trish and Fonda these days?" I asked, hoping I had remembered the names of Megan's posse.

Meg reached to ring the bell for our stop. "I don't even know or care about Trish. Fonda and Azul are at Six Flags today." Tickets to Six Flags are \$39.99/day for each person over 48 inches tall, and that doesn't include bus fare, balloons, or Dr Peppers. Not easy to do on Petco money. "They asked me to come, but"

But your mother made you come out with me.

In twelve years I have never missed a Christmas pageant, a brownie merit badge ceremony, or a school concert. I planted pumpkins at Megan's daycare, I picked up books at library sales and donated them to her school, I sold raffle tickets to send her to Science Camp. Josie, my ex, once said, "Will, you've been a great. . ." She floundered. ". . . the best estranged father I can imagine."

Best Ex-Dad in the Lone Star State. I'm thinking of putting it on a T-shirt.

Megan and I stepped into the steamy Houston air at the bus stop in front of Jamison Middle School. Heat waves shimmered off the metal slides in the playground. "How come your name isn't on my birth certificate?" Megan asked.

"What?"

"Mom had it out last night. She was looking for my shot records. Your name isn't on my birth certificate. Dad's is."

Dad meaning Don, the jarhead fucking ex-Marine Josie married a year after leaving me. "My name's not on the certificate?"

"That's what I was trying to communicate."

I said, "By the time you were born, your mother and I weren't together any more. I guess she decided it would be easier to have Don's name there."

"Don't they do a blood test or something?"

"No, I think they just take the mother's word." Or maybe the nurses didn't even ask Josie. Maybe Don went and filled out the paperwork himself. "She never told you I wasn't your dad." Silence. "She never said Don was your biological father."

"No. She always said you were." Meg not sounding convinced here.

As we turned up the walk to Meg's house, Josie waved at us from the living room window. "See you, kiddo," I said. When I leaned forward to kiss the top of her head, I saw she was wearing a bra.

My daughter stood a moment on the front steps, her hand resting on the doorknob. "Will, why don't you even have a car?"

Then Josie pulled the door open, and Megan disappeared inside.

#

I ride the bus a lot, which is not a very Houston thing to do, but I have my reasons. Every second Sunday for twelve years me and Megan had been going out together; half my memories of her are about riding buses. Megan nine months old and screaming with laughter as I zoomed her around like a fighter plane, until an old hag at the bus-stop said, "I never did see anybody treat a child so reckless!" Megan gurgling with laughter the whole time, pounding on my arms with her fat fists to make me do it again. Bottles of formula sticking out of the pockets of my leather jacket.

Megan, still chubby at three, kicking her feet until one of her canvas sneakers—she called them her slip-offs—went sailing into the head of a Vietnamese grannie across the aisle.

Megan skinny and eight, absorbed in a classroom copy of *Charlotte's Web*. Me watching the way her bangs fell in front of her eyes. When she came to a hard word she would squint, and the tip of her tongue would stick out.

Now she was wearing a bra and I didn't even have a car. She was looking nowhere but forward, at thirteen, and sixteen, and twenty-one. All those little Megans were invisible now. Ghosts, and only I could see them.

#

My name is Will Kennedy. I'm smart, but not as smart as my cousin Andy, who took up computers in Boy Scouts and now works in Austin's Silicon Gulch. I've been in trouble with the law, but not like my uncle Jerome, who is currently in jail for assault after catching his wife in bed with his parole officer. I'm considered a bit peculiar in the family, but not as peculiar as my Aunt Dot, who—though still a Baptist—believes that in a past life she was the queen of the planet Saturn. (Aunt Dot got into past life regressions as a weight loss therapy, and since discovering that she died of famine in eighth century Ethiopia, she's lost forty-eight pounds. And kept it off.)

Aunt Dot once told me it was thinking about me that got her interested in the idea of reincarnation. Personally, I have a hard time believing we all live many lives. The dead folks of my acquaintance have a hard enough time getting over just one.

#

When I was six years old, my Uncle Billy was killed in the K-resin facility of the Philips Petroleum complex. Vaporized, actually, except for the steel soles of his work boots, which he left behind on the factory floor like wet silver footprints. Statistically, this was not surprising. If you're a boy growing up in Deer Park, or Pasadena, or any of the other little suburbs east of Houston, the odds are pretty fair that Refinery Row will get you sooner or later. Before he died, Billy had been a deacon at the Deer Park Church of Christ, where we used to go before Mom got too heavy to fit in her Sunday dresses. Once a month he spelled Missy Pierce in the Sunday School rotation. As I recall, he took the Journeys of Paul very seriously, and could not abide a spitball.

The explosion came on the first Friday of First Grade for me, during Show and Tell. We ran to the classroom windows and watched a black cloud seep into the hazy

Texas sky like blood staining a gauze bandage. I didn't know then that Uncle Billy had dissolved into that dark air; I didn't hear about that until almost five o'clock, when the school decided it was safe to let us hurry into waiting cars, breathing through our hands, to be whisked home. My Mom still likes to tell how the company and county officials came on TV to tell everyone that the fumes billowing from the plant weren't *dangerous*, but we citizens might should stay inside for the rest of that ninety-nine degree August day. With all the windows shut. And the air conditioning off.

Like a lot of kids in Deer Park, I woke up in the middle of that night with a nose bleed. There were bloodstains on my pillow the next night too, and the night after that. "Solvent vapor," said my twelve year old cousin AJ wisely. Her daddy was a Brown & Root pipe-fitter. AJ (short for Julie-Anne) had an abiding interest in industrial pollution, on account of she'd been born with the second and third toes on both her feet stuck together.

The next time I saw Uncle Billy was three weeks later, at the family reunion. This was back when the reunion was still on the Labor Day weekend, in a campground down on the banks of the Little Blanco River. What I remember best about those reunions is the food. The picnic tables were heavy with lemon pound cake and potato salad, brisket and fat quarters of watermelon. That year Uncle Raider's pretty Mexican wife, Juanita, had brought tortilla soup and chile rellenos and cinnamon cookies and jalapeno spread and chicken tacquitos, which my Dad said was trying too hard, and my Mom said you couldn't blame her. I said their oldest boy, Carlos, told me his grandma Braunftzer (Raider's mother, this would be) didn't like Juanita on account of she was Catholic. Mom and Dad looked at one another for a spell and then Mom told me to hurry up and fix my plate.

I went for the hot dogs (made special with Hill Country German sausage and slathers of ketchup and chow-chow), and a little bit of slaw, the kind with raisins, and also a fat splotch of banana pudding with 'Nilla wafers in it. I had just grabbed a handful

of Fritos when I bumped into Uncle Billy. He was so cold my sunburned shoulder puckered up with goose-bumps, and he was black and white, as if he had come out of an old movie. I had seen plenty of ghosts before, and I knew right away that him being black and white meant he was dead.

Having left his boots on the refinery floor, Uncle Billy stood woefully barefoot, staring at Aunt Dot's famous Ambrosia salad, which was always a favorite on account of she used fresh pineapple instead of Del Monte fruit cocktail, and real cream instead of Cool Whip. Uncle Billy turned to look at me, and I felt guilty, because he was never going to experience the sticky tug of banana pudding against a spoon, or taste the fizzy burn of a cold Coke. I was so guilty, and so glad. So glad it was him dead and not me.

#

By the time Uncle Billy met his maker at Philips Petroleum, I had learned not to talk about dead people. Even my Mom's mouth pulled down and her eyes got worried every time I mentioned ghosts. Everybody knew I saw them, of course—this was small-town East Texas, after all—but I kept my mouth shut with everyone except my cousin AJ.

AJ wasn't like the rest of Deer Park. She wore John Lennon glasses and burned incense in her room and told people she was a witch. When the cousins were over at Uncle Walt and Aunt Patty's house, the grown-ups would hunker down in the heavily upholstered front room to "set for a spell," which meant talking slowly but loudly over the baseball game on the TV. Us kids, meanwhile, would rush outside, ignoring our mothers' warnings about being out in the heat of the day. This was the 70s, and if sunscreen *had* already been invented, word of it had not come to Texas. It was the business of any self-respecting white kid to burn to the point of peeling over every square inch of exposed skin twice a summer. The best place to peel was at your ear-tops, where sometimes, if you were very careful, you could slough a whole curled layer in one piece,

translucent and slightly bendy, like the abandoned shell of a cicada, which we called katydids back then.

AJ was expected to mind the rest of us. Sometimes she would grab the magnifying glass out of the garage and let us try to burn pinholes through a Cornflakes box on the patio, but most often our general holler and hubbub would be too shattering on Aunt Patty's nerves, and she would order AJ to take us back to the rumpus room at the back of the house where they kept a TV so old it didn't know any programs but *Gunsmoke* and Popeye cartoons. We'd fight a while about what we were going to play next, until finally AJ would drawl, "Hush you up, vermin!" and turn off the lights, and bring in one of her tapers of incense. We would happily hush and pull the curtains closed while she told us truly terrifying stories about the bloodthirsty ghosts left over from Jean Lafitte's pirate crew; or about this friend whose sister had picked up a Cajun hitchhiker who turned out to be a homicidal maniac just bust out from a Louisiana prison for the criminally insane.

Once AJ even brought out the skull of a monster baby that had been given to her by a old blind prophetess in Lake Charles. Trying not to seem impressed, my cousin Doreen said it looked like a cat skull to her, but AJ said that was how they knew it was a demon baby, because it had been born with fangs and eyes where the pupil slits ran catwise, up and down, which is why as soon as the parents got home from the hospital they killed it themselves by emptying half a can of RAID into the baby's bottle. Then we all felt sorry for the kid, even if it was a cat-headed demon baby, and everyone got quiet and very respectful because we all knew this story was particularly true and poignant for AJ, on account of her toes.

When I was twelve, AJ was the object of my very first crush. Of course she was a senior in high school and I was only a seventh grader, but I found I could use my stories about dead people to make myself interesting. I told her about Mr. Johnson, the old black janitor at my school who was still wearily scrubbing down the bathrooms even though

he'd hung himself from a beam in the boiler room with a bright orange extension cord when I was in second grade. AJ seemed kind of disappointed by how ordinary most ghosts seemed to be, but when I tried to make my stories more exciting, like hers, she could always tell right away that I was lying. She'd look at me over the tops of her little round sunglasses and put on the heavy Black Girl accent she used to aggravate her Daddy. "You axin' me to b'lieve dat, DK?" DK short for Dead Kennedy, which was her nickname for me. So I learned to stick to the facts.

Then AJ left high school, moved out of Uncle Walt's house and disappeared into the world of grown-ups, which it seemed to me then was another kind of dying.

I had other crushes, and dates, but after that first love I didn't talk about the dead until my junior year in high school, when I started going out with Josie Wells. Josie was the only girl in the history of Deer Park High to make the cheerleading team and then drop out without getting pregnant. She was blonde, with six rings in her left ear and two useless doper parents. We got married a month after senior prom and moved to Houston proper. First, because I was damn good and ready to live someplace where nobody would start humming "Ghost Riders in the Sky" when I walked by, and second because it's never the wrong time to get the hell out of Deer Park.

Two years later Josie left me. She was pregnant at the time.

For the next ten months, I crashed in many shitty places: friends' apartments, shared houses, parked cars, and, twice, the playground at Hermann Park. You know your life has taken a wrong turn when you're trying to get your beauty sleep in a tire swing.

I finally got my shit together enough to move into the Parkwood Apartments complex, which lies between the Astrodome and the Texas Medical Center. Parkwood is six square blocks of poorly-maintained brick four-plexes built in the 1950s, all owned by

the Baylor College of Medicine. Baylor doesn't specialize in real estate. As a result, both the maintenance and the rent are five years behind the times. On my budget, an excellent trade-off. Most of my neighbors were grad students from exotic places like China or Pakistan or Idaho, many with little kids. There was also a mix of old people on fixed incomes, and a sprinkling of the Sort-Of-Working poor, like me. By the time Tom Hanlon called me about the dead girl in his garage, I had lived there for almost eleven years, getting fired and laid about the same number of times.

Every Monday night, my buddy Lee had me over for Foreign Film Indoctrination at his place, which is the other upstairs apartment in our fourplex. Lee had introduced me to Hong Kong action flicks, Jackie Chan and Jet Li, as well as Indian disaster movies. He was also partial to Soviet-era Armenian musicals. You don't know how good you've got it, he liked to say, until you watch the Armenian proletariat burst into joyous song on the floor of a tractor-parts factory.

We were scheduled to watch a flick the day after my not so great outing with Megan, but I managed to lose my job at Petco, which took the zest out of me. A definite sign of aging, there. In my early twenties, the days I got canned were three or four of the finest in a calendar year. I'd get bored with my current job and start experimenting, searching for management's exact snapping point. At the Galleria Men's Wearhouse, for instance, mascara alone isn't enough for them to risk a wrongful dismissal suit, but even one pretty lame coat of lipstick puts them into a comfort zone, firing-wise.

Anyway, it was back to job searching. (I've done welfare, but I don't like it. It's embarrassing to show up and stand in line with, you know, single-parent amputees.

Besides which, welfare doesn't pay enough if you have to buy chocolate covered almonds at a dollar a box to send your daughter to science camp.)

I headed across the foul hallway to tell Lee I was going to bail on Monday Movie Madness. Parkwood Apartments doesn't bother air conditioning public areas, so the foyer, staircase, landings and hallways in my building stay at a more or less constant ninety-three degrees from May until October, and stink like old gym socks from the mildew in the carpet. I slapped a couple of heat-drugged mosquitos into small splotches on Lee's door by way of knocking.

Lee appeared holding two bottles of Pacifica with the tops already off. He's about my age, with the kind of scruffy good looks that makes grown women want to tuck in his shirt. He gets fired less than me, and laid a whole lot more. Tonight he was wearing a peach-patterned bowling shirt and jean shorts. "*Bushmen!*" he said, handing me a brewski. "Tsui Hark moves the Chinese Hopping Vampire genre to the Kalahari desert. A classic."

"Can't do it." I took the beer.

He glanced sharply at me. "Uh, oh. You've got the chit, don't you?" Lee and I have this deal where only one of us is allowed to feel shitty at a time. If one guy has the feeling-shitty chit, the other one is honor-bound to suck it up. "Did you get fired again?"

"Screw you. It might have been my love life."

"You don't have a love life. So... you gonna skip the movie, just stay home and lay low?" he said, holding the door open.

"Yeah," I said, coming inside. I sat down at his kitchen table.

"I got left-overs. How did you get gassed this time?"

“Ate catfood.”

“Meaning, you ate catfood so you're not hungry for left-overs,” Lee asked, “or ate catfood in regards to Got Fired?”

“Numero dos. See, the first thing is, when I got in this morning, I found the weekend crew had screwed up the dogfood displays.” Lee’s dog, the Frankenterrier, padded in to scope me out. “This story isn’t really about dogfood,” I told him. “The dogfood is just the teaser.” Frank’s ears drooped and he settled down under the table to snooze.

Lee took a long pull on his beer. “You're making me hungry.” He strolled into his kitchen. “Want something? Vicky did a chicken molé before she went to work.”

“Of all your current girlfriends, she’s my favorite.” I’m a Pierce Top With Fork man, myself, when it comes to cooking.

“How long until we get to the part where you fuck up?” Lee fussed at the stove, dumping a drumstick onto a plate of rice and ladling molé sauce over it. “I bet that’s the funny part.”

I drained my Pacifica down to the half-way point, still trying to wash away the lingering taste of catfood. “Long story short: I’m already tired and cranky when Mrs. Belton rolls in. The Belton is this vicious scamming old hag who drops by three times a week to pass off color-xeroxed cat-toy coupons and complain about the service. So today she shows up claiming the NutroMax we sold her was spoiled. This is dry food in a vacuum-sealed bag. So I politely reached into the bag for some—.”

“And ate it.” Lee grinned. “Shit, that’s just standing behind the product. They should have given you a raise.”

“You’d think.” But I had gritted my teeth (still spackled with cat-food) and told Dickless Phil, my manager, that his general point—you can’t spray customers in the face with lamb-flavored catfood crumbs—was well taken, and that I would be careful not to do it again, even to vicious scamming old hags. He canned my ass anyway.

Lee and I considered my situation over Mexican food. I dropped out after eleventh grade. I knew even then it was a stupid thing to do, but there’s a big gap between knowing something and *getting* it. “The trouble is, I haven’t got anything to fucking *sell*,” I said, somewhere through my third Pacifica. “When I was nineteen, I used to despise the whole idea of growing up into, you know, 9 to 5 in the suburbs. The shows I watched on TV just wanted to sell me beer. Now it’s ads for life insurance and financial planning. And the bitch of it is, *I want them*.”

“Next it will be heart medication,” Lee said. “Home improvement supplies.”

“Viagra,” I said gloomily.

“When would you ever need it?”

“Fuck off.” I grinned into my beer. “But the older I am, the harder it is to get even shitty jobs. Fuck, I hate worrying about money.” I was pissed and even scared about losing a job that ten years ago I wouldn’t have been caught dead taking. How humiliating. “Jesus, Lee, I don’t have my G.E.D.. I can’t drive big trucks. I can’t even type.”

“There’s the Army,” Lee suggested.

“Or Refinery Row.”

“Same thing,” he said. We drank to that.

We finished eating and left the dishes in the Lee's sink. I stretched out on the couch while Lee started the VCR and then settled into a fat armchair as the FBI warning played across the blue TV screen. The Frankenterrier assumed his movie-watching position, slumped across Lee's feet. "You know what they say about, That which does not kill us," Lee said philosophically, tipping back another mouthful of Pacifica.

"?Qué?"

"It can still hurt like hell."

"Amen," I said.

#

That night I couldn't get to sleep. Long after midnight my crappy A/C unit was still beating like a tired heart, losing its long war with the sweltering Houston heat. I lay on the mattress in my "studio" apartment, sweating and itching, while my mind stupidly circled: I couldn't even take my kid to Six Flags—how did I think I was going to help her through college? Why wasn't my name on her birth certificate? When the *hell* had she started wearing a bra? *Why*, for that matter; she was still flatter than a West Texas highway. Around and around, as useless as that old A/C unit, a record with a scratch in it.

Funny to think Megan had probably never seen a vinyl record.

I rolled off my mattress and dug the Classifieds out of a three day old copy of the *Houston Chronicle*, looking for high five-figure jobs for guys with a keen interest in alternative music and no high school degree. The pickings were slim.

At two in the morning I gave up and went outside. Houston is a basically a concrete saucepan full of swamp water. The sun heats it up to a slow boil in May and keeps it simmering through to the end of October. Even at two o'clock in the morning it was still sweltering, sweaty and restless. A tree roach as long as my thumb went hurrying

along the sidewalk, big enough to throw a shadow by the yellow gleam of the streetlight. I walked up Cambridge to Holcombe and took the path along Braes Bayou. "Bayou" is our romantic Southern word for "big concrete drainage culvert." The bayous are theoretically there to protect us in case of heavy rain, but they don't stop flooding; they just give you an extra hour to get to high ground.

I walked west along Braes Bayou until the path dipped under the Fannin overpass. From down in the gully, I couldn't see the cars as they passed overhead—just catch the sweep of their lights going by, and the hiss of tires.

Before me, the path disappeared into the darkness under the bridge. The silhouette of a man was standing there like a gatekeeper in the gloom. I slowed up. A lot of homeless people hang out under these bridges. This guy was wearing a construction-worker's battered hard hat and no shoes or socks. I wondered if I should give him a buck, or if that would just make me a good target for a mugging. I slowed up more. Now I was close enough to hear him muttering, some kind of Bible verse.

I had just decided to turn back when he raised his face and I saw that he was dead. His bare feet and pale cheeks and hard-hat were all in black and white, and he had the lightless eyes the dead so often have. Those underground eyes. "His *feet* like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace," the dead man said. "And his *voice* as the sound of many waters."

"Jesus," I whispered. "*Uncle Billy?*"

#

He was still wearing his Brown & Root jumpsuit. His naked feet stuck out from his pant legs, white as cut mushrooms. I always remembered him as grumpy and middle-aged, but now I realized he had died at only thirty-two or thirty-three. My age. I got a powerful feeling that he had been waiting for me: waiting years for me to come down to the concrete bayou and be washed in that black water.

One cold distant streetlight showed in the strip of night sky overhead. The banks of the bayou seemed very tall. Down here the darkness was pooled, heavy and deep. Dirty water gurgled and whispered, echoing under the bridge. The smell of decay was thick as mud in my mouth. My heart beat. My chest shook with the thudding of it. Billy's eyes slid across my face, blind as stones. "Be thou *faithful* unto death," he said, "and I *will* give thee a crown of life."

I jumped off the asphalt path and bolted up the embankment, digging my fingers into the muddy slope. Bits of cardboard and old beer cans rattled and pinged as I scabbled up the hillside. Sliding and slipping, I grabbed at the tall grass, tearing out clumps of it, pulling myself up until I scrambled out of the dim ravine. "I have somewhat against thee," Uncle Billy called, from down in the gloom. "Because thou hast left thy first love."

#

Up at street level, the night seemed normal, flat and wide. Lights on in the office buildings of the Texas Medical Center. Traffic humming through the intersections. I ran and I didn't look back, ran like a bastard down Fannin and then along Old Spanish Trail, my feet thudding and the sound of my own ragged breathing loud in my ears. I didn't stop running until I banged up the back stairs of my apartment building and found myself safe in my own kitchen again.

The last time I saw Uncle Billy, it was 1977. I was watching *Batman* every day after school. My grandpa Jay Paul was still alive, lingering on in the nursing home that would later be shut down after three orderlies were investigated for Elder Abuse. Back then, David Bowie was in Berlin, making great records like *Low* and *Lodger*, but in Deer

Park even a rebel like AJ only knew “Space Oddity.” In 1977, Josie was already starting to look after her useless dooper family. It would be years before we met.

The present is a rope stretched over the past. The secret to walking it is, you never look down. Not for anyone, not even family. The secret is to pretend you can’t hear the voices of the people who have fallen down there in the dark.

#

There was a red light blinking on my answering machine. The message was from Tom Hanlon, telling me his offer was still on the table. A thousand bucks to come see about the dead girl in his garage.

I stared at the machine for a long time, thinking about Megan, and bus fare, and rent, and the fact that I didn't have a job anymore. This is how girls get to be hookers, I thought. You get into a jam where you've only got one thing left to sell.

I called him back.