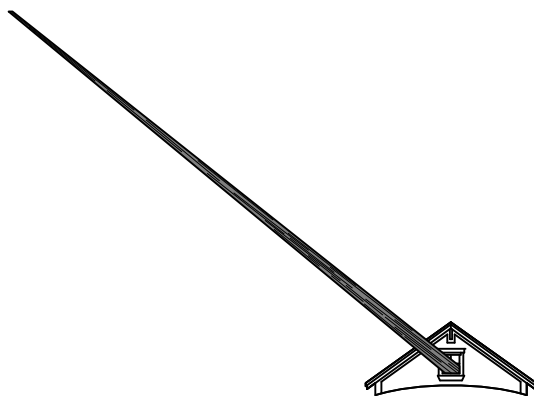


MONSTERS IN THE ATTIC

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Aliens, Terrorists, and One Voluble Raccoon

Blaine C. Readler



Full Arc
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For my brother Ken who, via miniscule scrawl spanning many pages of many letters, showed me that every day our lives reveal humor worth getting down on paper.

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Bucketfuls of thanks to MTB for wrestling the initial draft of the story into something resembling a novel.

And it turns out that all of the information that man has carefully accumulated in all the books in the world can be written in this form in a cube of material one two-hundredth of an inch wide—which is the barest piece of dust that can be made out by the human eye.

—Richard Feynman, *There's Plenty of Room at the Bottom*, 1959

After I give lectures—on almost any subject—I often am asked, “Do you believe in UFOs?” I’m always struck by how the question is phrased, the suggestion that this is a matter of belief and not of evidence.

—Carl Sagan, *The Demon-haunted World*

Chapter 1

Tuesday morning

Gabe snapped awake. Echoes of an unidentifiable sound faded among the nooks and crannies of his brain. He was looking at his guitar case leaning in the corner, draped with his clothes where he'd tossed them the night before. His eyes moved to the floor where they met another pair staring back. These were black and shiny, and lay along the backside of a snout. Black fur framed the eyes, and was itself edged top and bottom by a white band that melded to an animal-gray. The effect of a masked little bandit was so effective that Gabe marveled at evolution's apparent sense of whimsical mimicry.

The black eyes blinked once. Gabe blinked in return.

"Hello, Gabe," the mouth said in a gravely little voice.

This jolted him from his befuddled stupor and he sat upright with a cry of despair, covering his eyes with his hands. He looked down, but of course there was no raccoon. It had been over a year since his last flashback, and he'd thought that he was finally free and clear of the lingering effects of the bad LSD trip. The fact that he'd been a little drunk when he'd fallen into bed the night before was beside the point, which was that whatever he thought he saw was now history.

Punky came trotting in to see what the ruckus was all about. Barely ten inches high, the Toy Poodle held the unshakable opinion that by sheer conviction alone he could convince the world that he was a Doberman. The tiny titan's original name had been Pinksty, bestowed by his previous owner, Mrs. Crabnuckle, and this was one

of the reasons why Gabe now owned him, and why Mrs. Crabnuckle was an ex-client.

“Sorry about that,” Gabe said, rubbing his eyes with his palms. “I thought I saw a poody-cat.”

Punky tilted his head back and forth, lifting each ear in turn.

Gabe patted the bed next to him. “Come on up and say good morning.”

Punky leaped forward. He failed his first attempt and fell back out of sight, but an instant later Gabe saw the determined little head appear above the side of the bed as the poodle struggled to hang on.

“Come on, big boy,” Gabe encouraged and reached out to pull him up by his front paws.

The dog set about feverishly reapplying a fresh coat of saliva on Gabe’s face as he fended him off, laughing at the earnestness of the struggle.

Punky suddenly froze except for a probing twitch at the end of his nose. He jumped to the far edge of the bed and looked at the floor next to Gabe’s guitar case. With one excited bark, he leapt down and sniffed back and forth, searching, searching.

“Huh,” Gabe uttered, intrigued. He wondered if this was some sort of man/dog telepathy. Maybe Punky had picked up some subtle clues from him. “If so,” he said to Punky, “I apologize for dragging you into my bad trip.”

Gabe slid out of bed, stepped into slippers, and went to the kitchen to make coffee. He slapped at an ant racing across the counter. The dry climate of San Diego prevented the spawning hoards of flying bugs that infested the east coast. The void was nearly filled, though, by those that crawled. Gabe had spent his whole life in the old house surrounded by armies of tiny marauding ants and platoons of spiders waiting patiently to feast on them. The ants had always been black, but the ones he’d been squashing for some weeks now were of a light hue, almost silvery. The black natives attacked in mass, an endless line of thousands of tiny critters marching resolutely towards some dropped bit of jam. These new silver fellows, however, preferred to strike out alone. Also, whereas fallen comrades of the black old-guard were eventually carried away by their replacements, the squashed silver carcasses lay there until

Gabe finally wiped them away with a paper towel. Their breed apparently didn't believe in "No soldier left behind."

He flipped on the radio sitting next to the coffee maker and was greeted with static. Silver ants and static: the latest irritants of his life. He turned the tuning dial back and forth until he could make out the announcer above the hiss and crackle. The static had started about the same time that the silver ants had suddenly appeared, and it was getting progressively worse. Maybe the old radio was finally dying. Maybe the silver ants were responsible.

The announcer's words were sinking in. She was talking about an explosion, a nuclear explosion.

What? He must have heard wrong. No, both the USGS and the Pentagon were reporting a large explosion—presumably nuclear—in the Pacific Ocean, two hundred miles west of Panama. It had happened just a half-hour before.

Gabe fiddled with the dial. Anonymous sources within the government were speculating that it was one of our submarines on maneuvers in the area. They guessed that one of the missiles on board had blown. This, of course, was supposed to be impossible.

Well, apparently not.

The phone on the kitchen wall rang. Gabe picked up the receiver, expecting it to be the fire department telling him where to find the nearest bomb shelter, but it was the power utility company. They were finally returning his call from two days before when he'd complained about a high bill. Gabe asked the man at the other end of the line if he'd heard about the nuclear submarine explosion.

"No, sir. We don't listen to the radio while working."

"Well it *did!*"

"What?"

"Go *off!*"

"An explosion?"

"A *nuclear* bomb, for God's sake!"

"Right. So you had a question about your bill?"

"Don't you *care?*"

There was a pause, then the man from the power company said, "Look, Mister Wolfekow, I've got about fifty people on my call list today. Do you want to talk about your bill or not?"

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t believe you don’t care that a nuclear bomb just went off.”

“Mr. Wolfekow?”

“Okay, okay. Yes, my bill was about twice what it normally is.”

“Well, Mr. Wolfekow, I see that you have a remote meter monitor.”

“Yes. They installed it a few months ago.”

“They’re very accurate; we take readings directly. Have you recently installed a new appliance? Maybe a dishwasher or clothes dryer?”

“No, nothing’s changed. Maybe your monitor thing broke.”

“They don’t break, Mr. Wolfekow.”

“What? They’re, like, maybe as reliable as the Navy’s nuclear submarine missiles?”

Again, there was a pause. “I can send a man out to take a manual reading if you like.”

“Yeah, but how do I know the electric meter itself isn’t screwed up?”

“Mr. Wolfekow, they—”

“I know, I know. They never screw up. Okay, just send the guy out.”

Gabe hung up the phone. He walked to the window. There was no orange glow in the sky, just the leaves of the Eucalyptus trees in the canyon glinting in the morning sun. The birds chattered away like every other morning. Maybe the world wasn’t going to end after all.

He picked up the electric bill still lying on the table. He could feel the tension seething inside him. Why did he have to be such a wimp when it came to conflict? Hell, this was just some jerk from the power company.

Gabe suspected that his mom had, unintentionally, taught him to be. He’d been born when she was just eighteen, and they’d lived with his grandmother here in her house. He didn’t even know who his father was. When he was five, his mother went on a vacation without him and never returned. Even now, he didn’t know if she was dead or alive. She’d been a terrible mom during her short career. Gabe remembered only two extremes: either

cuddling and cooing, or yelling and throwing things. His uncle had called her manic-depressive, but his grandmother had said she was just a spoiled brat who never grew up.

But still he missed her.

His grandmother had been his salvation, his day-to-day mom. When she'd died a few years before, the old house seemed unbearably empty. He missed his mom in a whimsical way, like he missed his childhood. The loss he felt towards his grandmother, however, was an acute ache, a tearing grief.

At twenty-four, Gabe still felt like a lost little boy.

The static was annoying, so Gabe shut off the radio. The coffee was ready, so he sat down at the table, and Punky whined to jump up on his lap. "No," he said, waving him off. "Give it a rest, you pest." At this attention Punky began jumping around hysterically, so Gabe made room and helped him up. Punky walked two circles, nearly falling off the precarious ledge, and then settled down to snooze.

Gabe drank his coffee and slapped at another silver ant. He missed, and it scurried away around the edge of the table. The phone rang again. He gently laid Punky, growling in his sleep, on the floor, and picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Gabe, did I wake you?" a female said.

The voice was familiar. He knew he knew her, but how? "Uh, no, not at all."

How the hell did he know her?

"Gabe, this is Christie."

Like her voice, the name tickled recognition but evaded identification. "Hey ... Christie. How are you?"

There was a pause. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Sure I do." Gabe tossed the contents of his mind's filing drawers around randomly, frantically searching for remembrance.

Another pause. "Raige Aige?"

A woman's face clicked into place. "Christie! Yeah! How are you?"

They'd spent a night together about a year ago. He'd gone to a CD release party for a local band that he despised. He didn't so much despise the band, as the droning monotony of their metal-grunge music. She'd come to the party with Brent, the guitar player,

but he'd been busy getting drunk and making an ass out of himself, so she'd sat and talked with Gabe. They hit it off, and he ended up driving her home and staying the night. It had been the most blissful night of his short life. He hadn't seen her since.

"I guess you're surprised to hear from me," she said. "I hope we can put the past behind us."

Gabe was indeed surprised to hear from Christie. He thought she'd never talk to him again.

"Uh, sure," he agreed. "No hard feelings?"

She was silent a moment. "Of course not," she finally said, not too convincingly.

He could hear it in her voice. It had been a year, and he knew she was still mad at him. So, why was she calling? "It's good to hear from you, Christie. I never had a chance to explain—"

"There's nothing to explain," she said quickly. "That's history. No need to dwell on it."

Not dwelling sounded fine to Gabe. Christie had been with Brent for six months. She'd fallen for his good looks, stage charisma, and the fact that he was abusive. Christie's father was a mean drunk. She left home when she was sixteen, and an attraction to abusive men followed along. She'd told Gabe that a part of her despised Brent, but she hadn't been able to break away.

She'd found something different in Gabe, and she'd reached her hand out with the hope of escaping her cycle of abuse. When Brent had pounded on her apartment door the next morning shouting murder, Gabe and Christie climbed out the back window. They had both run from Christie's abuse. Her hope in Gabe had been ill-founded. If he hadn't been able to face her demon, how could he help her? She didn't return his calls, and he'd given up after a week.

"How have you been?" he asked. "Still going to school?"

"Just two classes. I'm working as a waitress. You know, getting by."

"I know how it is. I finished two years, but I don't have money to continue."

"You were majoring in math."

"Good memory."

Gabe winced. It also meant that she'd really been listening—had really cared—that night a year ago. “Jobs for two-year math majors are few and far between,” he explained.

“You still play in a band, though.”

And that's why she's calling, he thought. She'd obviously seen the ad he'd placed in the paper for a vocalist.

“Yeah,” he said. “Still with the same guys. I've been carrying all the vocals, and the audience is starting to bring tomatoes in their pockets. We've changed the name of the band to *Jump Start*. It's a take-off from the jump-blues of the fifties.”

“I guessed as much. The ad mentioned that you were looking for someone who could sing like Ann Cole. I had to do some research—she recorded *Got my Mojo Working* in 1957.”

“On the button. Have you heard that version?”

“That took even more research, but yeah. It gives me goosebumps. She's a high bar to climb over.”

“She has the same effect on me. So ... I guess you'd like to try out for the band?”

“If it's okay”

“Sure. Uh, do you have any experience?”

He felt silly asking this kind of question of a woman he'd slept with.

“I only started a few months ago, but I've been working on it. I sang for a while with Raige Aige, but Brent couldn't stand to see guys looking at me on stage.”

Well, there it was.

“So, I guess you're still with...”

“Brent?”

“Yeah—”

“No,” she cut in immediately. “...well, yes. No!”

Nothing's changed, Gabe thought. “Sounds complicated.”

“It is. It's complicated. But, the short answer is that we're not together now.”

“Now?”

“I'm taking a break. He's supposed to be thinking about the whole thing. Last I heard, he broke up Raige Aige and disappeared. He does this every couple of years.”

“I see...”

“But this has nothing to do with that.”

“Of course. You’re just another candidate trying out for my band.”

Christie was silent a moment. “Is there a problem with that?”

“No. No problem. No reason we can’t be friends.”

There was silence at the other end of the line.

“...or business associates,” Gabe finally added, “band co-members.”

“Business associates,” she repeated.

Gabe thought he heard regret in her voice, but decided that it was just skepticism.

“I’ve never known a local band that made enough money to consider themselves a business,” she countered.

Gabe laughed. “You’re right. It’s a labor of love. No fame, no fortune, but an endless supply of hope.”

Christie asked about the audition, and Gabe gave her two songs to learn: *Summertime*, the old Gershwin song recorded by Janis Joplin, and the very same Ann Cole song they’d already talked about, *Got my Mojo Working*. The band had a gig the next night, and he invited her to come along and try out. She hesitated. He understood why. It was difficult enough auditioning, let alone in front of an audience. He was going to suggest something else, but she agreed before he had a chance.

They said their goodbyes and Gabe hung up the phone. He sat staring at his coffee. Talking to her had conjured forgotten images. Christie was a petite woman, but not skinny. Gabe imagined her as a mini-sized version of a super-model. He distinctly recalled her curly, chestnut hair falling softly over her shoulders....

Ouch! No sense torturing himself.

Mrs. Jones strolled nonchalantly through the room, pretending that she didn’t see them. Mrs. Jones was a cat for whom Gabe had pet-sat for some time until her owner, old Tom Heinke, had died. Tom’s wife had never wanted anything to do with Mrs. Jones, so Gabe adopted her. Tom had named her after the seventies Billy Paul song: “*Me and Mrs. Jones, we got a thing goin’ on, we both know it’s wrong.*”

“Come here, you flirt,” Gabe said.

Mrs. Jones’ aimless stroll serendipitously managed to bring her past Gabe’s chair, and he reached down and scratched her behind the ear. She continued her casual meandering, but now confined it to circles around his chair. Punky growled under his breath, opened one eye, and growled more earnestly. Punky and Mrs. Jones got along amiably enough, except when they were around Gabe and Punky became jealous. The jealousy bursting in Mrs. Jones’ chest was indiscernible.

“Family hug’s over,” Gabe declared, standing up and placing the reluctant Punky back on the floor. “If I don’t get to work, we’ll all starve.”

Every day Gabe made the rounds, caring for other’s pets while their owners were away. He visited some of his clients only occasionally when they left for vacation; others he visited every workday to walk their dog. He had never actively initiated this career. He had looked after a neighbor’s dog years ago in high school, and word slowly spread until he now got calls from people who were referred by people that he didn’t even remember.

Punky trotted behind him to the car. Mrs. Jones bade her farewell by rubbing herself against the door post. In a moment of career ambition he’d ordered a magnetic sign, which he’d slapped onto his car door. It read:

Gabe’s Pet Sitting
The Only Friend Your Pet Will Ever Need.

This was the only advertising he’d ever managed to muster. He thought the plastic sign looked cheap and dorky clinging to his Sentra, but he’d paid eighty bucks, and for that kind of money, he could swallow his pride.

Gabe reviewed the day’s schedule. As his clients called for his services, he wrote their names at the top of the appropriate sheet of his daily calendar book. Now, as he did each morning, he re-ordered them to create the day’s route. The rounds took him anywhere from one to four hours to complete. His income barely paid for his food, gas, and car insurance, but the hours were flexible, and he had plenty of time for the band. It also provided

plenty of time for college, except that there wasn't money left over for that. There were seven clients today. He figured he'd be back home in time for Oprah.

His first stop was a new client, a Doberman. Gabe got out of the car and shut the door before Punky could escape. The poodle's face bobbed up and down on the other side of the window, and he could hear the muffled yapping from inside.

"You know the routine," he called through the glass. "First time, I go alone. You'd be dessert for this big guy."

He pulled his ID rag from his pocket and headed up the walk. "Hell," he muttered to himself, "some day *I'll* end up as cheesecake for one of these canine monsters."

His ID rag was simply an old T-shirt that he never washed. He made a point to visit each new client before they left on vacation and he gave their dog a good whiff of the sweaty shirt, hoping the beast would remember his smiling face later when he came around again. As he came up to the large, expensive door to this large, expensive house, he could hear the frantic barks of the Doberman inside swearing up and down that he was going to rip open Gabe's throat if he could just get to him. He flipped through his large key ring, looking for the one with the number he'd assigned to this client. His job seemed easy to his friends, but it was times like this that he truly earned his money.

He found the key and unlocked the door. From inside, the Doberman's barks took on a new level of murderous intent. Gabe took a deep breath and opened the door a crack. A black muzzle immediately appeared, growling and pushing to get out. Gabe leaned against the door to keep the Doberman from slipping through. He held his ID rag up to the muzzle. Quick as a flash, sharp teeth grabbed the cloth from his hand and pulled it through. Gabe heard snarling and biting, then silence. He put his ear to the crack and heard sniffing. Once again, the stink of his sweat had come to the rescue.

Gabe opened the door another inch and put his closed fist up to the opening. He could lose a finger with an open hand if the Doberman decided he wasn't going to fall for the old rag-trick. It had happened to others. The muzzle appeared and sniffed his hand. Gabe slowly opened the door to reveal eighty pounds of

sleek muscle: the perfect watch-dog. The Doberman stood tensely, growling under his breath. He recognized Gabe, but wasn't necessarily going to like him. Gabe took a cautious step forward. The Doberman's growl notched up in pitch. It appeared as though he wasn't quite home free yet. He slowly reached down and retrieved the stink-rag. Maybe the monster needed a refresher about Gabe's association with the shirt. He held it out for the dog to smell again. With one quick snap, the Doberman grabbed the end of the shirt. The growls now issued through clenched teeth.

It was a standoff, as Gabe didn't want to let go of the shirt since it seemed to be occupying the part of the dog he most wanted to avoid. He gave it an experimental tug. The dog tugged back. Maybe he just wanted to play. The growls, though, implied that Gabe was the preferred chew-toy.

He took a tentative step through the door. As he did, the shirt became slack and the Doberman took the opportunity to advance his grip and move his hold closer to Gabe's hand. Gabe instinctively stepped to the side, into the hallway of the house. The growling was a steady drone, like a lawnmower in the distance. The dog's eyes stared into Gabe's. *One wrong move, they said, and you're minced-meat, mister.*

He took a step backward, towards the kitchen. The dog followed, keeping a steady pull on the shirt. Step-by-step, man and dog inched through the house—a dance of two species. Gabe didn't see the kitchen doorway jam behind him and stumbled, almost falling. The dog's growl became excited at this unexpected development. Gabe froze until the Doberman settled back to a steady drone.

Gabe glanced to the side and saw a note hanging on the refrigerator. With one hand, he reached over and pulled it off. He read:

Mr. Wolfekow,

Hello! I hope Toodles wasn't scared of you—he's such a sensitive animal, I hate to leave him alone. Just a reminder: his food is under the sink. Don't forget his water. He'd love it if you played with him a while. He's probably lonely.

Thanks again,

Joan

Gabe laid the note on the counter and shook his head.

“Okay, Toodles. Easy does it,” Gabe said in a tone he hoped was reassuring. “You’re just overcompensating for feelings of emasculation.”

With one hand hanging on to the shirt, Gabe used the other to get the bag of food out and pour some into the dog’s bowl. An equal amount spilled onto the floor. Gabe then filled the water bowl, spilling half of that over the dog food already on the floor. “Ho-boy,” Gabe said to the dog, “that’s going to make a mess.” As he leaned over to set the water bowl down, the dog decided to have some fun and gave the shirt a tug. Caught off-balance, Gabe did some fancy footwork to keep from falling backwards. As he shuffled around, he felt things crunching under his feet. He looked down and saw that he’d stepped all over the spilled food and water. It looked like the two of them had had a food fight.

Gabe contemplated the situation. He reached down, picked up the dog dish, and dumped the contents back into the bag, and then closed the cabinet door.

“Okay, funny-dog,” Gabe said, nodding towards the strewn mess on the floor, “there’s your lunch and dinner. Clean it up.”

Gabe and the dog waddled their way back to the front door. He knew he might as well let the damn dog have the shirt, but Gabe was feeling spiteful. He stepped through the doorway, and then with his free hand he snapped his fingers above the dog’s head. When the dog let go of the cloth to bite at this new target, Gabe snatched the shirt away and slammed the door shut. He heard mad barking and thumping as the angry dog threw himself against the door.

Gabe stood there listening. “Okay, maybe that wasn’t such a good idea,” he called to the dog.

He had to come back tomorrow.

When Gabe got back in the car he said to Punky, “He’s a very friendly dog, maybe a little shy. Tomorrow you can go in first and surprise him.”

Gabe could still hear the barking from inside the car.

He checked his route. He could cut ten minutes if he used Mission Canyon Road. He took a deep breath and looked at Punky. “Wadda’ya say? You wanna to visit your old stomping grounds?”

Three streets down Gabe turned onto a tree-lined street. He'd always enjoyed this stretch. It wound along the side of the canyon before jumping across to Pacific Boulevard. Tree-shade is a luxury in San Diego, and the canyon growth provided an exotic feel. He hadn't been along this way since ... well, since he'd kidnapped Punky.

"You stay down, out of sight," he said sideways to Punky.

The dog peered around with keen interest. He seemed to recognize the area, and gave an excited little bark.

"You stay low. That's all we need is for old Crabnuckle to see you."

Hearing the name of his former owner, Punky started jumping around the front seat, barking.

"Hey! You sound like you *want* to see her!"

Punky wasn't listening. He was busy making as much ruckus as he could.

"*Cut it out!*" Gabe yelled.

Punky froze, surprised by Gabe's outburst.

This was a mistake. Gabe felt guilty about taking the dog from the elderly woman, and it was setting him on edge. He knew Punky was better off with him, but, after all, he *had* kidnapped him. "Stay down," he said gently. "What's done, is done."

Punky continued peering around, but kept quiet.

They came around a wide turn, and there was Crabnuckle's house on the left. Gabe was relieved to see that she wasn't outside.

Upon seeing his old home, Punky started barking again.

"No you don't," Gabe said, leaning over to hold him down.

He had to divide his attention between the road and the dog, and Gabe didn't see the car backing out from the driveway just beyond Crabnuckle's until almost too late. He slammed on the brakes, screeching to a stop. Punky tumbled forward onto the floor. A man's head appeared out of the driver's window and looked back at Gabe. He was swarthy, with black, curly hair. His sunglasses stared at Gabe for a second. Gabe waved sheepishly. The head pulled back inside, and the car took off.

Gabe saw motion out of the corner of his eye. It was Mrs. Crabnuckle! She'd been bending down behind the shrubs, working in her yard, and had now stood up, curious about the commotion.

She looked right at him, a slightly puzzled expression pinching her plump face.

“Oh shit,” Gabe whispered. He turned his sheepish wave now to her, simultaneously tightening his grip on Punky out of sight on the seat next to him. Punky wasn’t used to such rough being handled by Gabe, and he nipped him.

“Yeow!” Gabe cried.

Suddenly Punky was on his lap, barking away at the windshield where a bee buzzed, tapping against the glass. Punky had been stung once by a bee and had sworn eternal vengeance.

Gabe glanced over at Crabnuckle. Her face had changed from puzzlement to suspicion. He saw recognition spread.

“Pinksty! Oh my Pinksty!” she cried, running forward and waving her gardening tools. Punky looked at her and his barking turned to a low growl.

“*Now* you decide you don’t like her,” Gabe said, putting the car in gear and taking off.

In his rearview mirror he saw Crabnuckle run out into the road.

“I knew it was you, Gabriel!” she yelled. “I *knew* it! I’m going to call the police!”

Gabe took the next turn doing fifty, and the yells faded behind them. He looked down at Punky. “You finally remembered, eh? She dressed you up like a clown. Then she tortured you when you didn’t behave like a trained little monkey. Remember?”

Okay, tortured was maybe extreme, but Gabe just couldn’t stand to see her snap her finger against Punky’s little snout whenever he didn’t behave right. He *knew* that hurt like hell—he saw it in Punky’s eyes.

Oh well, he thought, she was bound to find out eventually. He suspected that she never really believed that Punky had run away like he told her.

Gabe looked down at Punky and grinned. “Oh *Pink*-sty,” he said, in a mocking tone. “What a *cute* little doggy!”

Punky barked once and then ignored Gabe.

Changing his name from Pinksty to Punky was the first thing Gabe had done.

What the hell kind of name was Pinksty, anyway?

* * *

Back home after finishing his rounds, he found a message on the answering machine from Mrs. Crabnuckle. She promised to sue him for everything he had, and then see that he was thrown in jail for life.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Gabe said, giving Punky a good rubdown. “Someone can feed *me* for a change.”

Chapter 2

Wednesday morning

Gabe heard his name. It was the same gravely voice he'd fabricated as a kid by swallowing air and then burping out words. He assumed he was dreaming, but it seemed too real. He opened his eyes. The raccoon's face was inches away. "Gabe," it said again.

This was too much. He sat up and cried out, holding his face in his hands. When he looked down, the raccoon was gone.

Too, too real. He took a deep breath. His heart was pounding. Damn! Why had he let Derrick talk him into trying that LSD? Shit! Was he going to have to live with flashbacks forever?

On the other hand, these raccoon hallucinations didn't have that feel. LSD flashbacks took you back to what you were *feeling* when you tripped. He didn't think a flashback would include actual hallucinations, particularly since his trips hadn't even starred any raccoons.

And he hadn't drunk that much the night before. Okay, maybe he had, but those threats from Mrs. Crabnuckle had gotten to him.

As if on cue, Punky came trotting in. He froze, staring at the open French doors. Gabe used his grandmother's sitting room as his bedroom, and the doors opened to a small deck. He never closed them completely, even in winter when the temperature fell into the forties at night. Punky's ears stood at attention and his legs were spread wide, as though he was posing at a show. Suddenly he barked and ran through the open doors. Outside, Punky continued

barking frantically. It was a daily routine. The ground squirrel that lived under the deck teased Punky, and the fool fell for it every time.

“Shut up, you worthless mutt!” Gabe yelled. “You’re going to wake the neighbors!”

He looked at the clock. It was 9:40. Well, maybe not.

Gabe was climbing out of bed when he thought he heard someone outside say, “Back, mutt!” in that same raspy voice of his flashback. Punky gave out a painful yelp. Gabe went to the French doors to investigate, but was met by a whimpering Punky hightailing it back inside. Once safely behind Gabe, the miniature dog turned and started barking again. Gabe looked outside. The morning marine layer cast a diffused light across the small yard, but nothing moved other than birds flitting from one bush to another.

“Leave the poor squirrel alone, you bully,” Gabe scolded.

Punky divided his attention between Gabe and the open doors, as though expecting someone to come through.

Gabe saw a wet gleam on the dog’s nose. He reached down and picked him up. “It looks like you got too close to Mr. Squirrel,” he said, touching his finger lightly against the wetness. It was a drop of blood from a small scratch. “You’d better stick to the food I put in your dish, big boy. It doesn’t fight back.”

He took Punky to the bathroom and dabbed the blood off, and then tried to apply an antiseptic, but the wiggling ball of muscle squirmed out of his arms. “I hope the police come to take you away, you worthless parasite!” Gabe called to the dog as he scampered off. “It’ll serve you right.”

Gabe went to the kitchen and started coffee. He turned on the radio. Through the static, he heard ongoing reports on the explosion in the Pacific the day before. Radiation readings confirmed that it was nuclear, and no contact had been made with the submarine. The pentagon had as good as admitted that the explosion had indeed been the sub. Authorities downplayed the dangers of fallout, pointing out that the winds were easterly at the site, carrying whatever radioactive debris there might be farther out to sea. As a precaution—simply as a precaution—they were advising people in Acapulco, a couple of hundred miles northwest of the explosion, to stay indoors for a few of days.

“Like when the Soviets told the cleanup crew at Chernobyl that they’d be okay if they just kept a scarf over their noses,” Gabe told himself.

Every last one of the first crew on the scene had died within a week.

The constant static made the carefully worded news seem even more dire. He reached over and switched it off. Static was replaced by sounds of birds chirping outside and the coffee bubbling through the filter.

* * *

Gabe and Punky made the rounds for the day, avoiding Mission Canyon Road with a wide margin. As he pulled back into his driveway, Gabe noticed an old, blue Buick LeSabre parked on the street in front of his house. He got out and saw a man in the driver’s seat on the gray side of middle age watching him. At first he thought that Mikhail Gorbachev had come to visit, for there was a birthmark the size and shape of a frog on the man’s bald forehead. Thinking that the guy might need directions, Gabe walked over, but Mikhail started the car and drove away.

“Good luck,” he said to the receding rear bumper.

Inside, he found that two guys had left messages in response to his ad for a vocalist. Three more plus a woman called later in the afternoon. He asked each to send a demo tape, explaining that he’d call after listening to it. He reminded himself that he hadn’t asked Christie for a tape. Well, he never claimed to be an equal opportunity employer.

He arrived at the bar that evening at 7:30. They weren’t due to start until 9:00, but it took nearly an hour to set up the equipment, and he liked to relax and have a bite to eat before starting. Derrick and Randy generally showed up at the last minute and tangled each other in cords as they scrambled to be ready on time.

This was the second time they were playing this bar. It had originally been a house, and the owner had knocked out an inner wall and added an extension on the front. It still looked like a house though, making the gigs feel like a high school party. The band set up in a tiny alcove that used to be the pantry. They were hidden off in a corner, and the people in the bar had to crane their

necks to see them, at least those that even bothered to check out the band. Although the front door was only about ten steps from the pantry cum band-stage, the bar owner insisted that they bring the equipment all the way through the kitchen in the back. No sense risking disrupting a long line of people that might, for the very first time, queue up out front to get in.

Gabe pulled into the back parking lot. His car was crammed from floor to roof. There was barely room for him to squeeze in. It was a Rubik Cube puzzle packing it all. After six trips through the kitchen he had the boxes, amps, and speaker cabinets strewn around the small pantry, and he began the task of arranging and wiring it all up to produce a working band stage. From the time he began packing the gear at his house until he arrived back home and had it all stored away again, he would put in a full eight-hour work day. All for twenty-five dollars in pay—a labor of love for sure.

Gabe gave the waitress an order of fish tacos and was testing the microphones when he looked up to find Christie standing there, smiling. His memory had not enhanced her one bit; in fact, if anything she was even more attractive than he'd remembered. Her smile warmed a happy spot in his chest that he hadn't felt in some time.

“Hello, Gabe,” she said. “It’s good to see you again.”

Considering that she'd refused to return his calls a year ago, he assumed she meant that it was good to be auditioning.

“Hey, Christie,” he said in greeting, stepping off the six-inch stage. Uncertain what to do next, he extended his hand, and Christie shook it. Her hand was warm and soft—a tactile extension of her smile.

“Ready to sing some tunes?” he asked.

“No. But if I wait any longer, I'll be too nervous to even try.”

Gabe grinned and swept his hand around at the rabble that was filling the place. “Not exactly a tough crowd. If they listen at all, they'll just be glad I'm not singing.”

“It's not the audience I'm nervous about,” she said, blushing.

Right. He had control of her destiny with the band. He would decide whether she was given the opportunity to tour the dingy little bars of the back streets of San Diego for roughly three dollars an hour.

Gabe's fish tacos arrived. He abandoned the microphone checks, and sat with Christie at a sticky table. "You're looking great," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Compared to what?"

Gabe didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure if she was implying that he probably didn't have many girlfriends, or to the fact that he'd only ever seen her in one other outfit. In either case, she wasn't exactly going out of her way to draw him in.

"I'm sorry," she finally said, obviously sensing his consternation. "That probably sounded rude. I didn't mean it that way."

This really was awkward. Was she being careful because she liked him, or because she wanted to get in the band?

"No problem," he said. He changed the subject. "Hey, how about that nuclear explosion?"

She seemed relieved to be on safer ground. "I *know!* I can't believe people are so blasé about it. It's as though they don't really know what's happened."

He shrugged. "Maybe they don't. News has become just another type of entertainment. The world's troubles are one big show, paid for with a cable subscription. The only time people get upset is when the local news drums up some fabricated scare about poison in the water, or invisible radiation from their cell phones."

Christie gave him a quick conspiratorial smile. "The media cries, 'Wolf!' and the sheep go 'Baaa!'"

Gabe returned her grin and offered her one of his tacos. He wished to God he'd never crawled out of that rear window in her apartment a year ago. Where would he be now if he'd just stayed and stood up to Brent?

Probably in a wheelchair, he decided.

Derrick pulled in at 8:20, and Gabe went out to help him carry in the fiberglass drum cases. Right on queue, Randy pulled up behind him and struggled to extract his massive bass amp from his Volkswagen bug. Nine o'clock arrived, and Derrick and Randy

were still fiddling with their setups. Gabe took his place and waited patiently. He'd learned long ago that there was no point in making a fuss before or during the gig. The key was to keep everybody relaxed and grooving (to borrow a term from his grandmother). He would remind them at the next practice, but he knew he didn't have much leverage; they were practically volunteering their time as it was.

They finally kicked off their first set. Christie sat at a front-side table, and Gabe found himself quite pleased to have her there. It made all the difference having someone to play to. Everyone else in the joint carried on their conversations, albeit at an increased yell volume. In fact, the owner came over after a couple of songs and, following ritual, asked Gabe to turn down. It happened at every job. The problem was the drums. They had no volume control. Derrick could try to play lighter, of course, but it killed his spirit. Gabe understood this, so they continually tussled with bar owners, trying to find the maximum acceptable level.

Forty minutes later it was Christie's turn. They'd decided that she'd come up and do her two songs at the end of the first set. Even though Gabe didn't really know her all that well, he could see how nervous she was. She thanked the band, introduced herself and the song, and they were off into *Summertime*. Gabe realized only as they were playing, how difficult this piece was for a vocalist. The popular version has a pace that's so slow it feels almost like a dirge. The singer must hold on to every third and fifth syllable, carrying the note so that it hangs there in the air for all to see. The slightest drift from true pitch is painfully obvious, a test for even a seasoned professional. The fact that Christie didn't fall flat on her face was encouraging. That's not to say that her delivery was worth preserving. A forgiving critic, as Gabe knew he was, might have described it as a "mixed" success. It was hands and feet above what he had been feeding the bar, however, and more than a few in the audience paused in their conversations to watch her. The room filled with applause when they finished, the first time that night.

Before the clapping faded away, Gabe launched the two-four riff of *Got my Mojo Working*. Derrick and Randy joined in with the heavy back-beat, and Christie took the microphone from its stand and burst forth with the impassioned title line. The dusty

corners of the bar reverberated with the infectious foot-stomping beat as Christie implored the audience with sincere entreaty to please, please explain why her mojo “just won’t work on you.” Like the gospel-trained Ann Cole, Christie’s words impaled the audience with the heartrending frustration of unrequited love. Gabe saw people grinning with unabashed joy. He felt the hairs rise at the base of his own neck.

Hot damn! This girl could *sing!*

They crescendoed the song through the final chord, and the room flooded with applause. Gabe saw the owner standing at the back, clapping and smiling. He put down his guitar, took the mic from Christie, and announced that the band would take a break, but the applause and whistling just thundered on. Christie was blushed and grinning from ear to ear. Gabe knew the feeling. There’d be no turning back for her now.

The applause finally died away, and as Derrick passed by, he casually said to Christie, “You’re hired.” She looked at Gabe, and he just shrugged.

Gabe went off to the bathroom and left Christie with Randy at the band table. When he returned, he found that Randy had gone off to another table to visit with some friends, and two guys he’d seen lounging at the bar had come over and sat down with Christie. One of them, wearing just a denim vest in order to show off his construction-worker muscles, had his arm around the back of Christie’s chair and was leaning in close, talking to her. She did not appear to be enjoying his company.

Gabe stood for a moment studying the situation. The last thing he wanted was a confrontation, particularly with a couple of testosterone-infused construction studs. He considered calling in the bar owner to explain that the table was reserved for the band, but decided against this, firstly, because it was a pretty wimpy thing to do, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the “band table” was a concept completely fabricated by the band.

There was only one course. Gabe strode over, feeling the blood pounding in his temples.

“Sorry, guys,” he said louder than he’d intended, “this table is reserved for the band.”

Christie looked up with relief. Vest-guy turned a deliberate, slow glare on him. He then turned with mock perplexity to the two remaining empty chairs. “I don’t think there’s a problem here, pal. Seems to be room for everybody.”

No use beating around the bush. “I don’t think Christie wants to be bothered.”

Vest-guy held Gabe in a cold stare. “‘You don’t think’—that about sums it up.”

How do you argue with pure belligerence?

You don’t, Gabe decided; you simply stand your ground. “Leave her alone,” he demanded, wishing it had sounded more authoritative, rather than like a plea.

Vest-guy grinned. “Let’s ask the lady—”

“Yes, let’s,” Christie cut in. “You can either go back to the bar and scope out some other victim, or have this beer poured down the front of you. Your choice.”

She held up her half-full glass to demonstrate.

Vest-guy was taken by surprise, and leaned back, holding his hands up in protest. “All right! All right! All you have to do is ask.”

He got up and turned back to the bar, but uttered, “*Bitch!*” just loud enough for them to hear.

“Hey!” Gabe yelled before his brain had a chance to process the wisdom.

Vest-guy stopped and turned to Gabe. He looked at him a moment then spat, “Faggot!” and walked away, gesturing for his friend to follow.

Gabe watched them take their place back at the bar. “Want to get some fresh air?” he asked.

“Sounds good,” Christie replied, then added in a loud voice, “*The stink lingers!*”

Vest-guy glanced over, but immediately turned away.

They went out the front door into the cool California night and sat down together on a low cement retaining wall next to the building.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” she said.

“It seems like you did most of the rescuing.”

She smiled. “It’s easy to be brash when you have the cavalry standing next to you.”

“Cavalry? More like a crowd heckler. I’m a faggot you know.”

She gave him a quick look, and then laughed. “That’s right, and I’m a bitch.”

“The definition of which is any woman who won’t go to bed with the jerk. Are you sure you want to spend your free evenings crooning to these kinds of guys?”

She pretended to think deeply about this. “I guess it’s the price I have to pay for fame and fortune. I’ll manage as long as I’ve got you guys to protect my honor.”

She was silent a moment, then added quietly, “It sounds like maybe I passed the audition.”

He nodded slowly. “Technically we have to agree on it, but Derrick already cast his vote, so it looks like a majority.”

Gabe spread his arms behind him and leaned back. His left arm was behind Christie, and she sat back against it, using it like the back of a chair. It seemed a cozy thing to do, and Gabe considered wrapping his arm around her shoulder, but figured he’d better not push it.

Instead, he decided to demonstrate that he too had been listening a year before. “As I recall, you ran away from home when you were sixteen.”

“Not so much ran as just walked out the door. My mom wanted me to come back, but not enough to dump Dad.”

He looked at her. “That was your condition?”

She nodded. “Yeah. My mom kept telling me she was going to, but she could never pull the hooks out.”

“Are they still alive?”

“My mom is. She lives with my sister in Chicago. My dad died three years ago in a car accident. He was drunk, of course.”

Her brow furrowed with concern, or maybe pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She looked at him, puzzled. “About my dad? Don’t be. His death was my freedom. No, the tragedy is that he also took the life of a little boy in the other car.”

The carefree voices of happy people spilled from the open door. They seemed far away.

“Well then, I’m sorry for the little boy,” Gabe corrected. “You really hated your father? That much?”

“I really hated him.”

The period at the end of that sentence didn’t sound very solid. He looked at her.

“He was my dad,” she finally added. “Did I love him? I don’t know. I *needed* him ... but I also hated him. That’s for sure.”

“Needing something you hate. Boy, sounds like hell.”

She took a deep breath, as though expelling for the thousandth time a lung-full of bad air. “How about your parents? Was your father a bastard too?”

Gabe lifted his shoulders. “I never knew him. I don’t even know who he is.”

Christie nodded. “I remember, you told me that. Your mom left you.”

“That was *my* freedom. I didn’t know it at the time. I just felt abandoned in a way that very few people can even imagine. After a while, though, my grandma became my real mom.”

Christie looked up at the stars and smiled. “We’re both just lost puppies looking for a safe home.”

He wanted to wrap his arms around her, but Randy called from the open door. It was time to start. Gabe stood up and stretched, and they headed back into the light and the drone of garbled bar conversations.

* * *

Christie sat alone at the band table. Gabe thought the second set was working up to be one of the best they’d ever done. He knew that pretty eyes watching him skewed his perception, but he floated on the joy of it anyway.

Towards the end of the set, a tall man with serious intent appeared in the crowd. He looked around, searching, and Gabe recognized him. He had cut his hair short and traded in the outlandish uniform of a rock band priest for a full-length black leather bad-ass coat, but Gabe would never forget that face.

Brent had arrived.

Gabe's solo faltered, and his heart stopped as time stood still. Brent's eyes scanned the room and locked on Christie. He strode over and took a seat next to her. Gabe tried to concentrate on finishing the song, but couldn't take his eyes off the two of them. He tried to read her face. Did it speak welcome? She seemed initially irritated, or maybe confused, but as Brent sat close and talked into her ear she was soon nodding reluctantly, perhaps in resignation. Several times Brent glared up at Gabe.

The second set dragged to an end, and Christie came up to him before he even had a chance to take off his guitar.

"I've got to go," she told him, watching his face.

He shrugged. "Right," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

He pretended to concentrate on adjusting his strap. Christie stood there, seemingly uncertain what to do. "He wants to talk," she finally explained.

He looked over at Brent. The handsome man sat waiting, impassive.

"Sure," Gabe agreed.

What *could* he say? That he wanted her to tell Brent to go to hell? Beg her to come home with him so that he could make passionate love to her?

"I understand," he mumbled.

But he didn't understand. From his mouth came the words, "I had the idea you were through with him."

"I was ... I am. He just wants to talk."

"To talk," Gabe repeated. He didn't know what else to say.

Christie sighed. "He claims he's changed."

"That sounds familiar."

"I know, he's said that before. But I think it's true this time."

"Oh yeah? What's changed?"

"He seems more ... serious. More settled."

"Of course. He realized what he was losing."

Gabe was surprised to hear himself say that.

Christie put her hand on his arm. "I've got to go, Gabe. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay," he said, turning away to unplug his guitar. "Talk to you tomorrow." He tried to sound uncaring.

He could sense her standing and watching him. When he looked, she was walking off, and Brent stood up to take her away.

Gabe took off his guitar and sat down at the empty band table. He stared at the people getting drunk around him. Nothing ever worked out. It was his own fault for letting his guard down, for allowing hope to seep through. He considered getting soaked himself. As part of their compensation—potentially a majority portion—the band’s drinks were half-price.

He shook his head. Getting drunk was something you should do for fun. Start drowning his sorrows and it could become a habit.

Derrick and Randy wandered back, and they started the third set. The band table looked abandoned and forlorn.

During the break before the last set, Gabe stepped out the back door through the kitchen for some fresh air. After a few minutes Derrick joined him.

“I’ve got something to cheer you up,” Derrick consoled.

The guys obviously guessed what was going on.

“News that Brent is wanted by the FBI?”

“Not quite so useful, but the FBI would probably be interested.”

Uh, oh. He could guess what it was. This was Derrick, after all. “What kind of drugs tonight?”

His friend gave him a hurt look. “My honor is wounded. I don’t *always* have drugs.”

He looked at the drummer in surprise. “I apologize for jumping to conclusions. What, then, pray tell, do you have to lift my spirits?”

Derrick pulled a small wad of crumpled tin foil from his jacket pocket.

“Hash?” Gabe asked, perplexed.

“From Morocco,” Derrick replied, carefully unwrapping the packet and pulling a small pipe from his pocket.

“I thought you didn’t have drugs?”

Derrick threw him a querulous glance. “Hash isn’t a drug.”

“Oh, it’s not? What do you think our FBI friends would call it?”

Derrick waved off the idea. “They call everything a drug. If I smelled glue, they’d call it a drug.”

He raised one eyebrow and looked at his friend, giving him a moment to think about this. Derrick was giving his full attention to lighting the pipe, so Gabe said, “Der, I think in that case, the glue *would* be considered a drug.”

“You’re cracked. Glue’s glue. Drugs are drugs. Here,” he said, coughing as he handed the lit pipe to Gabe.

What the hell, Gabe thought. He took the pipe and inhaled deeply. Instantly, memories of all the other times he’d smoked the sweet pot-derivative came rushing back. He wasn’t even high yet and his mind was taking off. The hash was brown and dense and crackled wickedly as they drew deep tokens. By the time the last tiny ember extinguished, Gabe was good and high.

Derrick was right. He was happy. No, not happy. He still hurt somewhere inside, but that place was tucked away. Now he lived in the moment, second-by-second, and each second had a life of its own. After one amazing second passed, the next seemed even more amazing, and the previous one part of history, long, long ago.

* * *

The last set lasted about six hours, although Gabe’s watch claimed that only the standard forty-five minutes had passed. He played beautifully, his notes ascending dizzying heights of thundercloud updrafts, to be flung through the stratosphere on spinning trajectories of pure esthetic intent. Gabe knew this, felt this, as he stood transfixed in a transcendental shaft of inspired light on the six-inch stage in a bar that used to be a house and was now home to all the local soaks who, by the last set, could marginally manage to command their hands to produce a weary clap and their mouths to call out in slurred words, “Shmoke aaawwnn the Waaater!”

Gabe wasn’t fooling himself. He knew that had they recorded this set, upon later listening he’d find that the device had only captured one dimension of the beautiful creation he now heard. He knew that the recording would sound for all the world like his normal playing, only more sloppy.

It took him a long time to pack up the gear as he attempted, over and over, to fit it all into his car. Each time he tried, there, on

the pavement, would sit two or three pieces after the car was full. The speaker cabinets had apparently found food and gotten fat. He finally drove off with an amp head on his lap, and found his way home on streets that he knew intimately, but tonight were simultaneously familiar and eerily strange.

He pulled the car into the garage and was surprised when Punky didn't greet him at the kitchen door. "Where's the Punkster?" he called out.

He thought he heard a whimper in the living room, and found the dog cowering under the sofa. "Punky! What's the matter, big boy?"

His little companion refused to come out.

He wasn't going to try to understand. Not tonight. Not sky-high on hash. He was immensely sleepy. This was the last mile of the hash trip. His brain had toured all the rides at the carnival, and now it was time to lay down on the backseat of his grandmother's car for the ride home and drop off to sleep. He wasn't sure he could make it to his bed. He began stripping off his clothes as he staggered towards his bedroom.

When he saw the raccoon sitting on the chair, he assumed that it was a trick of the shadows, as only the hallway light illuminated his room. He flipped on the light, but the raccoon remained. It said, "Hello Gabe," in the now familiar gravelly voice. "Please don't yell."

Gabe was incapable of yelling. He could do nothing but stand with his shirt in hand, staring at the apparition.

"We need to talk, Gabe," the apparition said.

Gabe blinked hard. He had, on one or two other occasions, hallucinated on hash, but they had been transitory and mild. When he'd accepted the pipe from Derrick, he hadn't thought about the possibility that he might re-invoke serious LSD flashbacks.

It looked like he'd made a bad mistake.

"Gabe, can you understand me?" The raccoon's mouth moved in a most unnatural way when it spoke, as though manipulated by sophisticated computer graphics.

Some part of him rebelled at conversing with an hallucination. That was the last phase of the druggies who'd

crossed over the line. But this creation of his mind insisted that he respond. He compromised by simply nodding his head.

“Good. Gabe, I need your help, and you are probably wondering what I am.”

Maybe that had also been a mistake. It only encouraged his imagination to continue the charade. He dropped the shirt, turned off the light, and fell into bed. Maybe it would disappear if he ignored it.

“Gabe, are you still listening?” he heard the raspy voice say.

He pulled the pillow over his head and wrapped his arm around it to block out the world. He could still hear the muffled words of the raccoon, sounding eerily like Louis Armstrong, but he wrapped his arm tighter and let the hash carry out its final task. Disturbing thoughts about the raccoon hallucination evaporated, and Gabe drifted off to blissful sleep.

Chapter 3

Thursday morning

Gabe woke the next morning feeling vaguely melancholy. The memory of Christie leaving with Brent floated up through the remnant hash fog. Gabe's melancholy slumped into sadness.

It served him right for setting himself up.

He opened his eyes, threw away the covers, and rolled over onto his back.

"*Oh shit!*" he said. The raccoon was still sitting there in the chair. It didn't say anything; it just sat watching him. Gabe searched for some explanation. Perhaps this was a normal, albeit bold, raccoon, and he'd only imagined its linguistic abilities. His theory was weakened by a small metal pendant hanging from the Raccoon's neck. It wasn't even a pendant, more like a small version of the talk-boxes he'd seen throat-cancer victims wear.

Like a bad nightmare whose inevitable conclusion is already sensed, the raccoon's mouth moved and words blared forth. "GOOD MORNING, GABE!"

Gabe sat up, but that was all his brain could muster.

"CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?"

Could he hear him? The question was: could he trust his own sanity?

Punky began barking from the living room, and Gabe heard the patter of feet as the dog galloped down the hall. Punky came dashing into the room and slid to a stop with one shocked yelp. Instantly he spun around and ran back out, whimpering.

There was no getting around it, this flesh-and-blood Disney creation was real.

“Okay, I surrender,” Gabe said, feeling more than a little foolish. “Who or what the hell are you?”

The raccoon smiled. This only advanced the surreal sense of the situation, since Raccoons aren’t meant to smile. They aren’t built for it. The effect was vaguely grotesque.

“A RACCOON,” came the reply. The words boomed crackly and distorted as though amplified through a faulty bullhorn.

Gabe closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, the raccoon was still there, but it had thankfully relaxed the bizarre smile. “That is obvious,” Gabe said, trying to be reasonable. “How can you talk?”

“ALTHOUGH NOT NEARLY AS FLEXIBLE AS HUMAN VOCAL CORDS, A RACCOON’S LARYNX CAN MANAGE SPEECH. IT MUST BE FORCED, THOUGH, AND PAINS THE ANIMAL IF DONE TOO LONG.”

Gabe raised his eyebrows and pointed at the metal pendant.

“THAT IS MERELY AN AMPLIFIER. I HAD THE IDEA THAT YOU COULDN’T HEAR ME LAST NIGHT.”

Gabe nodded. “Can you turn it off? I heard you, I just didn’t believe in you.”

The raccoon reached up with its paw and pulled it away. “Can you still hear me?”

“Just fine. I’m still not sure I believe in you.”

Gabe squinted at the animal. No, he didn’t feel any lingering effects of the hash. He shrugged. “But I can play along for now. You refer to yourself—to the raccoon—in the third person.”

The guest sat motionless, staring at him. When it finally spoke, Gabe had the sense that it—something—had been thinking about what it would said. “You mean that you surmise that there is more to the intelligence speaking to you than the animal’s brain?”

Gabe raised one eyebrow. “I couldn’t have worded it better.”

“That’s correct.”

Gabe was irked. Wait ... was it referring to his reply or ... “Do you mean, correct that I couldn’t have worded it better, or correct that you’re some other intelligence?”

The raccoon paused in thought again, but for only a moment. “Correct that I am a separate intelligence. Possibly correct to both.”

“Okay, brutal honesty it is then.”

“Have I offended you? I assumed you would value honesty.”

“No, I do. I’m just not used to honesty that hasn’t been politically sanitized.”

The raccoon sat silent for several seconds. The “intelligence” was apparently chewing on the metaphor. “I find this the hardest part of my task,” it finally said. “Nuances of human interactions are almost beyond comprehension.”

Gabe smiled. “I didn’t realize we were so complex.”

“You’re not. All intelligent beings have their singularly evolved interactive complexities.”

Gabe bit his tongue. He decided he would just going to ignore the insults. “You say ‘all intelligent beings’ as though you travel the galaxy ... look, who the hell are you?”

“A visitor.”

Gabe shrugged. “What kind?”

“Friendly.”

Gabe sighed. “Well, that’s good to know ... from where?”

“A place distant from here.”

Gabe felt as though he was playing twenty questions. “How distant?”

The raccoon paused a moment in thought. “Sixteen light-years.”

Gabe snorted. “So, you’re a space alien?” he scoffed.

“I had hoped to avoid that term.”

“Why?”

“It seems to hold derogatory connotations.”

“So, you’re telling me that you *are*? A *space* alien?”

“Correct.”

A hundred questions clamored for attention. He needed a handle of some sort. “Do you have a name?”

“Ronald.”

“Ronald?”

“Correct.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not joking. Why would you think that?”

“Ronald? It’s just so ... I don’t know, American.”

“That was the intent.”

“What’s your real name?”

“You mean the label I use when communicating with my own kind?”

“Yes, of course.”

The raccoon stared at him through another thought-pause. “I don’t know how to pronounce it in words.”

“You mean, you can’t pronounce it in English, or in any words?”

This thought-pause seemed to last longer. “I can’t pronounce it in English,” the raccoon finally replied.

“So, let’s hear it in your own language.”

This thought-pause seemed even longer still. Maybe it was hurting the raccoon’s throat too much. “It can’t be vocalized by the raccoon.”

Gabe had been feeling intimidated by the extraordinary circumstances. It felt good somehow to be pressing an issue. “Come on, give it a try.”

The raccoon sat silent for so long, Gabe thought that the alien spirit had departed. Finally it said, “There are a myriad ways to which I am referred. One could be, ‘Ambassador.’ ”

“That’s no surprise.” *And not much help, either*, Gabe thought.

He could understand that an alien culture might have fundamentally different structures of thought and communication, but a name seemed so, well, fundamental. Gabe had the sense that the alien was hiding something. Maybe he didn’t want to reveal his true name, like Rumpelstiltskin.

“So, how did you come up with Ronald?” Gabe asked.

“I wanted a name that you would feel good about.”

“Why would I feel good about Ronald?”

“My full name is Ronald Reagan.”

The raccoon sat staring at him.

Gabe burst out laughing. “You *are* kidding.”

After a short thought-pause the raccoon said, “I believe I have perhaps misjudged this.”

“Why, in God’s name, would you call yourself Ronald Reagan?”

“I had the idea that you often name your children after people you hold in honor. I thought that Ronald Reagan was perhaps the most honored man in recent time.”

Gabe shook his head. This was too bizarre. “I might get that impression from watching Fox news.”

He suddenly had an epiphany. “That’s how you got your information, isn’t it? The TV?”

“And radio, and news on the Internet.”

“The Internet?”

“Easy access.”

“Okay. Well, Ronny, you’re either the manifestation of a troubled mind, or the most important thing to happen to Earth since the asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs.”

“ ‘Ronny’? ”

“It’s a nickname for Ronald.”

“I see.”

Gabe jumped when the doorbell rang. He felt disoriented at this interruption from the sane world. He wasn’t ready to meld the two together. He hadn’t even decided yet what he thought about this talking raccoon named Ronald Reagan.

“Is that someone at your door?” Ronny asked.

“I guess it is.”

Gabe felt paralyzed.

“Are you going to let them in?”

“I guess so.”

Gabe crawled off the bed and walked out of the room. “Stay here,” he said as he closed the bedroom door. He was swinging the front door open when he realized he was only wearing his boxer shorts.

Christie was standing there.

“Hi Gabe,” she said and looked down at his bare legs.

“Oh! Hi, Christie. Uh, how are you?”

She grinned. “I’m fine. You look comfortable.”

“Oh, yeah. I, uh, just got out of bed.”

Christie’s grin faded. “Am I interrupting something?”

Gabe looked at her blankly. He felt dazed, as though still high on the hash, even though he knew he wasn't. "No! Of course not! Why would you say that?"

She searched his eyes. "You seem ... distracted."

"I'm not distracted. I just woke up."

"I see," Christie said, although she didn't seem to. Her tone had turned formal. "Well, I just came by to apologize for leaving so suddenly last night." She waited a moment, then said, "Goodbye, Gabe," and turned and started walking away.

She thinks I brought a girl home last night. The thought hovered there, like a flashing road sign.

"Wait! Christie!" he called.

She turned.

"I'm alone ... sort of."

She raised one eyebrow.

"Look," he said, "come inside, okay?"

She looked at him skeptically. "Are you sure?"

She didn't believe him. "Yes, I'm sure. I have something to show you."

The words were out before he had a chance to think about them. He held the door open, and she came back and walked into the house. He closed the door behind them and said, "You're not going to believe what you're about to see, or hear."

"Try me."

She seemed cautious, holding her judgment.

"I can't explain it," he said going to the bedroom door. "It just showed up."

He paused a moment letting her catch up, then swung the door open.

The chair was empty.

"Shit!" Gabe exclaimed. "He must have left."

Christie glanced around the messy room. "He?"

Gabe stood with his hands on his hips. "I assume it's a he," Gabe said distractedly. "He talks like a man, but they may not have the same sexes as us."

He looked at Christie. She was staring at him with obvious surprise. "Sex?" she said.

What a mess. "The raccoon."

Christie looked at him in disbelief.

Gabe shook his head. “No, no! I didn’t have sex with a raccoon. I didn’t have sex with anybody—with any-*thing*. Oh, jeez, look there was a really weird raccoon here this morning...”

Gabe realized he was going to sound totally insane. He couldn’t tell her the truth. “It was tame. It may have been somebody’s pet that got away. It must have come in during the night.”

Christie was still giving him the look. “And he could talk?”

“Not really talk, but it sort of sounded like it. The owners must have taught him some tricks.”

Gabe had always thought that if you’re going to lie, you should drag the truth along as far as you can.

Christie finally looked somewhat satisfied. She walked back out to the hall, picked up the shirt he’d discarded the night before, and smelled it. “You were smoking pot last night?” she said.

“Hash,” he replied.

“Uh-huh. How much?”

She was giving him an out. “A few grams, I guess. Moroccan.”

“Do you do it often?”

“Hardly ever. Derrick had some, and after you left I was feeling...”

She blushed.

Gabe took a deep breath. “Listen, Christie, I have to do my rounds later. Maybe you’d like to come along and we could listen to some more of the band’s songs.”

“Rounds?”

“My pet-sitting business.”

She nodded, thought a moment, and then shrugged. “Okay, that sounds fine.”

“About noon?”

“Okay. So ... this means I have the job?”

Gabe nodded. “Yeah.” He nodded harder. “Yeah, you have the job.”

She grinned ear-to-ear. “See you at noon, then,” she said, walking to the door.

The question swelled from somewhere deep within and overwhelmed him.

“Christie...”

She stopped at the door and turned.

“Did you ... and Brent...”

“Sleep together? No. I told you, he just wanted to talk.”

Gabe was hungry to know what the outcome of *that* was, but he sensed where the line was. “Great! I mean, okay ... see you later.”

Christie smiled and walked out.

Gabe stood looking at the door. Was he setting himself up yet again?

Of course. But, what the hell.

* * *

Gabe walked back to the bedroom. “Ronny, baby! You can come out now,” he called to the empty room. Only the birds answered through open French doors.

Oh well, he thought. Good riddance. Maybe it *was* just a lingering combination of hash and LSD legacy.

Ronny’s head appeared from around the edge of one of the French doors. “Is she gone?” he asked.

Gabe sighed. “Yes, but you’re not.”

The raccoon stared at him through one of those thought-pauses. “Why would you say that? It seems obvious.”

“It’s called sarcasm, probably another singularly evolved interactive complexity.”

“I know what sarcasm is. Was that also sarcasm?”

“I guess that’s for you to decide.”

Another thought-pause. “Somewhat.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Somewhat that it was sarcasm? Or somewhat that sarcasm is a unique human complexity?”

“The two are exclusive, aren’t they?”

“Somewhat.”

Thought-pause. “That was sarcasm also? Repeating the use of the word somewhat?”

“This could go on all day. Maybe I’ll just avoid using sarcasm altogether.”

“No. Please, I could use the practice.”

“Great,” Gabe grumbled. “I can see my place in history. Louis and Clarke had Sacagawea to guide them through the wild American frontier; Ronny-the-alien had Gabe to help him master sarcasm.”

“This is your hope?”

Gabe just looked at the raccoon’s head in the doorway.

After some seconds Ronny said, “That was sarcasm again, wasn’t it?”

Gabe nodded slowly.

“Okay, I agree. Let’s leave the sarcasm for later.”

“Agreed. If you hang out on the deck my neighbors are going to start asking questions.”

Ronny waddled in on his four paws and climbed back up on the chair.

“I have a thousand questions,” Gabe said.

“I have time, but I’m surprised that you’ve enumerated so many already.”

“That was hyperbole.”

“I see. That’s different from sarcasm, but not by much.”

“Ronny, where are you?”

Thought-pause. “Gabe, I’m right here in the chair. I suspect I don’t understand your question.”

“I know the raccoon is here, but where are *you*, the part that’s thinking about the difference between sarcasm and hyperbole. I doubt the raccoon’s brain is up to it.”

“That is difficult to answer, although you are right, I am not using the raccoon’s brain to think.”

Ronny sat silent for a moment—yet another think-pause. “Let me say that I am in association with the animal. I can see and feel what it does, and can control its movements.”

“Invasion of the raccoon snatchers.”

Think-pause. “I don’t understand.”

“Never mind. So, where *are* you?”

Think-pause. “I am simultaneously with the raccoon and with my colleagues.”

“And, where would that be?”

“I am sorry Gabe, but I cannot tell you that.”

Gabe noticed there was no think-pause for that answer. “Fair enough, for now. So, there’s no actual physical connection with the raccoon?”

Think-pause. “That is correct.”

“Does that mean that you could take control of me as well?”

A long think-pause. Gabe didn’t like the delay. “No.”

“Why not? If there’s no physical connection, then what would stop you from just flying your spirit into me?”

“You are not compatible.”

“Not compatible?”

“Correct.”

“How? How am I any different from a raccoon?”

“You are super-sentient, meaning that although the raccoon is also sentient to a degree, you—a human—have a developed intelligence which works easily with abstractions.”

Gabe waited, but apparently Ronny thought that this was explanation enough. “And this is why you couldn’t control me?”

“Correct.”

“Because I can understand abstractions?”

“Correct.”

Gabe looked at the raccoon a moment. “Ronny, are you trying to be sarcastic with me?”

“No, Gabe. Why? Does it seem so to you?”

“Never mind. Let’s get to the bottom line. Why are you here? I mean, why are your people on Earth? And why did you choose to contact me?”

“We’ve come to save the human race.”

Gabe sat down on the bed. “Ronny, no more sarcasm, right?”

“I’m not being sarcastic, Gabe. We’ve come to save you.”

“From what? Ourselves?”

Gabe had a vision of Klaatu walking down the ramp of his flying saucer onto the mall in Washington in 1953 with Gort, the laser-eye robot, behind him. How would the movie have turned out if Klaatu had been a raccoon? Gort would be zapping hunters with his heat-ray as their hound-dogs chase Klaatu up a tree.

“Not from yourselves,” Ronny said. “From the Demon-zombies.”

Gabe sat staring at Ronny. “Demon-zombies,” he repeated.

“Correct.”

“Ronny, are we on Candid Camera?”

“The TV show?”

“Yeah.”

“No ... I see. You think I’m joking. I’m not joking, Gabe.”

“You’re telling me that the human race is in danger from beings called Demon-zombies. Wait, you had to make up that name. They wouldn’t have a name that’s pronounceable either.”

Think-pause. “Correct.”

“You *chose* to call them Demon-zombies.”

“Correct.”

“Why?”

Think-pause. “The words seemed to describe them. They are parasitic beings who depend on other living organisms for their existence. More importantly, they have no sense of the individual. Like ants or bees, each unit only exists to further the hive.”

Gabe found himself alarmed for the first time since meeting Ronny. “So, they’d place no importance on an individual human life.”

“They put no importance on anything other than the hive. They put no importance on the entire human species.”

“*They want to wipe us out?*” Gabe was on his feet now.

A long think-pause. “Possibly. They don’t come with that specific intention, but they might decide this if they think you’re getting in the way.”

“Of what?”

“The expansion of the hive. Akin to bees swarming.”

“Why the zombie part?”

“They can take control of human individuals.”

“Like you did to this raccoon?”

Think-pause. “It’s not the same.”

“Why?”

“I do this to help you. They do it to conquer you.”

“That’s a difference in intent, not in method.”

Long think-pause. “Perhaps. But nevertheless, the difference remains, and I think it’s important.”

“It is, I agree. But, Christ! I can’t believe this is happening.”

“It is indeed a dire situation. You need our help.”

Gabe sat back down on the bed. “What’s in it for you?”

Think-pause. “Satisfying our altruistic fundamentals.”

“Somehow that sounds a little too politically correct.”

Think-pause. “It does not sound credible?”

“ ‘Correct,’ as you like to say.”

Long think-pause. “We also want to stop their expansion.”

“That’s more like it.”

Gabe felt an undercurrent of unease that he had to pry the real reason from Ronny. “Tell me, why do you have to operate through a raccoon? Why couldn’t you contact me directly?”

“A raccoon has prehensile hands, is a reasonable size, does not generally alarm people, and has a marginal ability to speak.”

“That explains the choice of animal, but still, why don’t you talk to me directly?”

“That would be difficult.”

Gabe waited, but Ronny didn’t elaborate. “Why?”

“You might find me offensive and distracting.”

“Where are your companions? Where is your spaceship?”

“Gabe, I think you can understand that I can’t reveal that to you.”

“You don’t trust me.”

Think-pause. “I trust you, Gabe. My companions must be careful. Surely you understand that there are people around you that may not be as trustworthy as yourself.”

Gabe smiled ruefully. “Like Brent,” he muttered to himself. “The bastard.”

Think-pause. “This is the Brent you mentioned when talking with Christie?”

Gabe’s eyes widened. “You were eaves-dropping?”

“Not intentionally. I heard your conversation, though.”

Gabe shrugged. “Yeah, that’s Brent.”

“He is not a friend of yours?”

Gabe laughed. “Oh no, quite the opposite.”

“I see.”

Gabe studied Ronny. “Okay, fair enough. I won’t press you for the location of your ship. So, when will these Zombie-demons arrive?”

“They’re called Demon-zombies, and the full force of the invasion will begin soon.”

“Full force? It’s already started?”

“The advance scouts are already here. We don’t have much time.”

“They’re *here*?” Gabe was on his feet again.

“Just a few. Many more may follow soon. These advance agents have already tested your technology.”

Gabe imagined slimy worm-beings holding cell phones to their antennae and asking whether they could be heard *now*. “How?”

“These scouts have detonated a small nuclear bomb—”

“The submarine explosion!”

“Affirmative.”

“Jesus! Do you know where they are? Are there any here in California?”

“Some.”

Gabe glanced out the window, as though he might find them lurking in the bushes. “Are there any in San Diego?”

“Yes, but not in the immediate vicinity.”

“What do they look like?”

“I explained. They take over a human body.”

“Right. The zombie part. Do you have pictures? How will I recognize them?”

Long think-pause. “You don’t need a picture.”

“Why?”

“You know one of them.”

“*What!* Who? *Who*, for God’s sake?”

Think-pause. “Brent.”

Gabe put his hand to his mouth. “No way!”

“Way.”

Gabe shook his head in disbelief. “No. That’s ridiculous. I saw Brent just last night. He wasn’t a zombie.”

“How would you know?”

Gabe remembered Christie saying that Brent had changed since she'd last seen him. A thought came to Gabe which set his neck hairs on end. "What about ... Christie?"

"You mean, is she a zombie?"

"Yes. *Yes!*"

Think-pause.

"*Well?* Yes or no, for God's sake! Its' a simple question!"

"No, she's not a zombie."

Gabe took a deep breath. He felt relief wash through him. Close behind, though, was a nagging doubt. It seemed too ... connected. Gabe rewound the previous couple of minutes. Yes, he was pretty sure he'd brought up the subject of Brent before Ronny revealed him as a zombie.

Quite a coincidence. "Are there other zombies around?"

Think-pause. "Yes."

The doorbell rang again. Both Gabe and Ronny jumped. They froze, staring at each other. "Somebody's apparently at the door," Ronny finally observed.

Gabe nodded and padded in his bare feet to the front door. He looked through the peep-hole and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the badge on the man's shirt. He trotted back to the bedroom. "It's just the electric man."

"Electric man?" Ronny squawked. He sounded almost alarmed.

"Yeah, he works for the electric company. He's come out to figure out why they've been overcharging me. They claim I'm using twice as much electricity as normal."

Without a word, Ronny jumped off the chair and scampered out the French doors.

"He won't be coming in here!" Gabe called, but the raccoon was already gone.

It was the first time Gabe had a view of the back of the raccoon, and he saw a distinct lump on the back of the animal's neck. He didn't have a chance to think about it, as the doorbell rang again, more insistently. He hurried to the front door and let the utility man in.

“Sorry to bother you, Mr. Wolfekow,” the middle-aged man explained, “but your records shows that your meter is not accessible from outside.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “That’s a whole other problem with you guys. That’s because my grandmother used to keep a dog out back where the meter is. The dog’s been dead for eight years. I’ve called about five times, but they can’t seem to get that information updated.”

“Sorry, sir,” the man said, looking at his clip-board and not sounding sorry at all. “Can you show me the meter?”

Gabe took him back outside and around the side of the house. Gabe was opening the backyard gate when he noticed movement above. He looked up and caught the flash of dark fur. It was Ronny’s tail disappearing above the roof. They had probably caught him by surprise. He doubted the utility man, or anybody else, would think twice about seeing a raccoon in the neighborhood. He realized that Ronny had chosen a good subject after all.

Gabe walked through the gate, but noticed that the utility man wasn’t following. He turned around and the man just pointed past him, into the back yard. Gabe looked where he was indicating. Charlemagne, the big, dumb mongrel from next door, was lying there gnawing on one of Punky’s chew toys.

“This is the dog that’s been dead for eight years?” the utility man asked dryly.

“That’s my neighbor’s dog. He always comes over to visit.”

The utility man gave Gabe a smug look that said that he, and the entire utility company, was now totally vindicated.

“It’s not my dog!” Gabe repeated. To hell with it. He clapped his hands. “Charlemagne! Get out of here!”

The dog barked and started running around in circles. Gabe yelled and chased him, and the dog finally bounded easily over the three-foot yard fence. *What a dumb mutt*, he thought.

The utility man had found the meter while Gabe was running around chasing Charlemagne. He wrote down the readings, then put the pencil behind his ear and started walking away.

“That’s it?” Gabe asked.

The man turned around, surprised. “Yeah.”

“That’s all you came to do? Read the meter?”

The man shrugged. “What else did you think?”

“I thought you were going to investigate why I’ve been using ... er, why you’ve been overcharging me.”

The man looked annoyed. Gabe was just another in a long line of irate and, in his eyes, misguided homeowners. “I’m not an engineer. I read meters. I do what’s on the ticket,” he said, holding up a green slip of paper for Gabe to see.

“Fine,” Gabe responded curtly. He had at least as much reason to be annoyed as this guy. “Maybe I’ll just stop paying my bill until this is straightened out.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” the man cautioned, walking away. “They’ll just cut off your service.”

The man was nearly gone around the corner of the house. “Did you ever see *Fun with Dick and Jane*?” Gabe called to the man, but he either didn’t hear him, or, more likely, chose to ignore the threat.

Gabe was still dressed in just his boxer shorts, but the San Diego sun had broken through the morning layer, and the outfit was now appropriate—at least, for around the house. He walked to the side of the house and called quietly up to Ronny. He waited a moment, but there was no response. Gabe went around to the front of the house, and back in to his bedroom. He was half expecting Ronny to be waiting for him, but the chair was empty. The room felt sort of empty as well.

Gabe remembered the lump on the back of Ronny’s neck. It was clearly something which Ronny—Ronny the alien—had implanted. It was probably how he was controlling the raccoon. Ronny had said that there was no physical connection. It was possible that Ronny had misunderstood, but it seemed more likely that he had simply lied to him.

This wasn’t good, Gabe decided. Not good at all.

END OF THE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

If you've made it this far, you might as well finish the story. It only gets more exciting. Just because a talking animal has stepped on stage doesn't mean we have a Disney story here. People could get killed. In fact, let me fill you in on a little secret: people *do* get killed. Also, the whole Earth is in jeopardy.

You can buy the book in all the usual places: Borders, Barnes & Nobles, and Amazon, of course.