MISS PEVERILNE’S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN
MISS PEREGRINE’S
HOME FOR
PECULIAR CHILDREN

BY RANSOM RIGGS

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Sleep is not, death is not;
Who seem to die live.
House you were born in,
Friends of your spring-time,
Old man and young maid,
Day’s toil and its guerdon,
They are all vanishing,
Fleeing to fables,
Cannot be moored.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
I had just come to accept that my life would be ordinary when extraordinary things began to happen. The first of these came as a terrible shock and, like anything that changes you forever, split my life into halves: Before and After. Like many of the extraordinary things to come, it involved my grandfather, Abraham Portman.

Growing up, Grandpa Portman was the most fascinating person I knew. He had lived in an orphanage, fought in wars, crossed oceans by steamship and deserts on horseback, performed in circuses, knew everything about guns and self-defense and surviving in the wilderness, and spoke at least three languages that weren’t English. It all seemed unfathomably exotic to a kid who’d never left Florida, and I begged him to regale me with stories whenever I saw him. He always obliged, telling them like secrets that could be entrusted only to me.

When I was six I decided that my only chance of having a life half as exciting as Grandpa Portman’s was to become an explorer. He encouraged me by spending afternoons at my side hunched over maps of the world, plotting imaginary expeditions with trails of red pushpins and telling me about the fantastic places I would discover one day. At home I made my ambitions known by parading around with a cardboard tube held to my eye, shouting, “Land ho!” and “Prepare a landing party!” until my parents shooed me outside. I think they worried that my grandfather would infect me with some incurable dreaminess from which I’d never recover—that these fan-
tases were somehow inoculating me against more practical ambitions—so one day my mother sat me down and explained that I couldn’t become an explorer because everything in the world had already been discovered. I’d been born in the wrong century, and I felt cheated.

I felt even more cheated when I realized that most of Grandpa Portman’s best stories couldn’t possibly be true. The tallest tales were always about his childhood, like how he was born in Poland but at twelve had been shipped off to a children’s home in Wales. When I would ask why he had to leave his parents, his answer was always the same: because the monsters were after him. Poland was simply rotten with them, he said.

“What kind of monsters?” I’d ask, wide-eyed. It became a sort of routine. “Awful hunched-over ones with rotting skin and black eyes,” he’d say. “And they walked like this!” And he’d shamble after me like an old-time movie monster until I ran away laughing.

Every time he described them he’d toss in some lurid new detail: they stank like putrefying trash; they were invisible except for their shadows; a pack of squirming tentacles lurked inside their mouths and could whip out in an instant and pull you into their powerful jaws. It wasn’t long before I had trouble falling asleep, my hyperactive imagination transforming the hiss of tires on wet pavement into labored breathing just outside my window or shadows under the door into twisting gray-black tentacles. I was scared of the monsters but thrilled to imagine my grandfather battling them and surviving to tell the tale.

More fantastic still were his stories about life in the Welsh children’s home. It was an enchanted place, he said, designed to keep kids safe from the monsters, on an island where the sun shined every day and nobody ever got sick or died. Everyone lived together in a big house that was protected by a wise old bird—or so the story went. As I got older, though, I began to have doubts.
“What kind of bird?” I asked him one afternoon at age seven, eyeing him skeptically across the card table where he was letting me win at Monopoly.

“A big hawk who smoked a pipe,” he said.

“You must think I’m pretty dumb, Grandpa.”

He thumbed through his dwindling stack of orange and blue money. “I would never think that about you, Yakob.” I knew I’d offended him because the Polish accent he could never quite shake had come out of hiding, so that would became vood and think became sink. Feeling guilty, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“But why did the monsters want to hurt you?” I asked.

“Because we weren’t like other people. We were peculiar.”

“Peculiar how?”

“Oh, all sorts of ways,” he said. “There was a girl who could fly, a boy who had bees living inside him, a brother and sister who could lift boulders over their heads.”

It was hard to tell if he was being serious. Then again, my grandfather was not known as a teller of jokes. He frowned, reading the doubt on my face.

“Fine, you don’t have to take my word for it,” he said. “I got pictures!” He pushed back his lawn chair and went into the house, leaving me alone on the screened-in lanai. A minute later he came back holding an old cigar box. I leaned in to look as he drew out four wrinkled and yellowing snapshots.

The first was a blurry picture of what looked like a suit of clothes with no person in them. Either that or the person didn’t have a head.

“Sure, he’s got a head!” my grandfather said, grinning. “Only you can’t see it.”

“Why not? Is he invisible?”

“Hey, look at the brain on this one!” He raised his eyebrows as if I’d surprised him with my powers of deduction. “Millard, his name
was. Funny kid. Sometimes he’d say, ‘Hey Abe, I know what you did today,’ and he’d tell you where you’d been, what you had to eat, if you picked your nose when you thought nobody was looking. Sometimes he’d follow you, quiet as a mouse, with no clothes on so you couldn’t see him—just watching!” He shook his head. “Of all the things, eh?”

He slipped me another photo. Once I’d had a moment to look at it, he said, “So? What do you see?”

“A little girl?”

“And?”

“She’s wearing a crown.”

He tapped the bottom of the picture. “What about her feet?”

I held the snapshot closer. The girl’s feet weren’t touching the ground. But she wasn’t jumping—she seemed to be floating in the air. My jaw fell open.

“She’s flying!”

“Close,” my grandfather said. “She’s levitating. Only she couldn’t control herself too well, so sometimes we had to tie a rope around her to keep her from floating away!”

My eyes were glued to her haunting, doll-like face. “Is it real?”

“Of course it is,” he said gruffly, taking the picture and replacing it with another, this one of a scrawny boy lifting a boulder. “Victor and his sister weren’t so smart,” he said, “but boy were they strong!”

“He doesn’t look strong,” I said, studying the boy’s skinny arms.

“Trust me, he was. I tried to arm-wrestle him once and he just about tore my hand off!”

But the strangest photo was the last one. It was the back of somebody’s head, with a face painted on it.
I stared at the last photo as Grandpa Portman explained. “He had two mouths, see? One in the front and one in the back. That’s why he got so big and fat!”

“But it’s fake,” I said. “The face is just painted on.”

“Sure, the paint’s fake. It was for a circus show. But I’m telling you, he had two mouths. You don’t believe me?”

I thought about it, looking at the pictures and then at my grandfather, his face so earnest and open. What reason would he have to lie?

“I believe you,” I said.

And I really did believe him—for a few years, at least—though mostly because I wanted to, like other kids my age wanted to believe in Santa Claus. We cling to our fairy tales until the price for believing becomes too high, which for me was the day in second grade when Robbie Jensen pantsed me at lunch in front of a table of girls and announced that I believed in fairies. It was just deserts, I suppose, for repeating my grandfather’s stories at school but in those humiliating seconds I foresaw the moniker “fairy boy” trailing me for years and, rightly or not, I resented him for it.

Grandpa Portman picked me up from school that afternoon, as he often did when both my parents were working. I climbed into the passenger seat of his old Pontiac and declared that I didn’t believe in his fairy stories anymore.

“What fairy stories?” he said, peering at me over his glasses.

“You know. The stories. About the kids and the monsters.”

He seemed confused. “Who said anything about fairies?”

I told him that a made-up story and a fairy tale were the same thing, and that fairy tales were for pants-wetting babies, and that I knew his photos and stories were fakes. I expected him to get mad or put up a fight, but instead he just said, “Okay,” and threw the Pontiac into drive. With a stab of his foot on the accelerator we lurched away from the curb. And that was the end of it.

I guess he’d seen it coming—I had to grow out of them eventu-
ally—but he dropped the whole thing so quickly it left me feeling like I’d been lied to. I couldn’t understand why he’d made up all that stuff, tricked me into believing that extraordinary things were possible when they weren’t. It wasn’t until a few years later that my dad explained it to me: Grandpa had told him some of the same stories when he was a kid, and they weren’t lies, exactly, but exaggerated versions of the truth—because the story of Grandpa Portman’s childhood wasn’t a fairy tale at all. It was a horror story.

My grandfather was the only member of his family to escape Poland before the Second World War broke out. He was twelve years old when his parents sent him into the arms of strangers, putting their youngest son on a train to Britain with nothing more than a suitcase and the clothes on his back. It was a one-way ticket. He never saw his mother or father again, or his older brothers, his cousins, his aunts and uncles. Each one would be dead before his sixteenth birthday, killed by the monsters he had so narrowly escaped. But these weren’t the kind of monsters that had tentacles and rotting skin, the kind a seven-year-old might be able to wrap his mind around—they were monsters with human faces, in crisp uniforms, marching in lockstep, so banal you don’t recognize them for what they are until it’s too late.

Like the monsters, the enchanted-island story was also a truth in disguise. Compared to the horrors of mainland Europe, the children’s home that had taken in my grandfather must’ve seemed like a paradise, and so in his stories it had become one: a safe haven of endless summers and guardian angels and magical children, who couldn’t really fly or turn invisible or lift boulders, of course. The peculiarity for which they’d been hunted was simply their Jewishness. They were orphans of war, washed up on that little island in a tide of blood. What made them amazing wasn’t that they had miraculous powers; that they had escaped the ghettos and gas chambers was miracle enough.

I stopped asking my grandfather to tell me stories, and I think
secretly he was relieved. An air of mystery closed around the details of his early life. I didn’t pry. He had been through hell and had a right to his secrets. I felt ashamed for having been jealous of his life, considering the price he’d paid for it, and I tried to feel lucky for the safe and unextraordinary one that I had done nothing to deserve.

Then, a few years later, when I was fifteen, an extraordinary and terrible thing happened, and there was only Before and After.
spent the last afternoon of Before constructing a 1/10,000-scale replica of the Empire State Building from boxes of adult diapers. It was a thing of beauty, really, spanning five feet at its base and towering above the cosmetics aisle, with jumbos for the foundation, lites for the observation deck, and meticulously stacked trial sizes for its iconic spire. It was almost perfect, minus one crucial detail.

“You used Neverleak,” Shelley said, eyeing my craftsmanship with a skeptical frown. “The sale’s on Stay-Tite.” Shelley was the store manager, and her slumped shoulders and dour expression were as much a part of her uniform as the blue polo shirts we all had to wear.

“I thought you said Neverleak,” I said, because she had.

“Stay-Tite,” she insisted, shaking her head regretfully, as if my tower were a crippled racehorse and she the bearer of the pearl-handled pistol. There was a brief but awkward silence in which she continued to shake her head and shift her eyes from me to the tower and back to me again. I stared blankly at her, as if completely failing to grasp what she was passive-aggressively implying.

“Ohhhhh,” I said finally. “You mean you want me to do it over?”

“It’s just that you used Neverleak,” she repeated.

“No problem. I’ll get started right away.” With the toe of my regulation black sneaker I nudged a single box from the tower’s foundation. In an instant the whole magnificent structure was cascading down
around us, sending a tidal wave of diapers crashing across the floor, boxes caroming off the legs of startled customers, skidding as far as the automatic door, which slid open, letting in a rush of August heat.

Shelley’s face turned the color of ripe pomegranate. She should’ve fired me on the spot, but I knew I’d never be so lucky. I’d been trying to get fired from Smart Aid all summer, and it had proved next to impossible. I came in late, repeatedly and with the flimsiest of excuses; made shockingly incorrect change; even misshelved things on purpose, stocking lotions among laxatives and birth control with baby shampoo. Rarely had I worked so hard at anything, and yet no matter how incompetent I pretended to be, Shelley stubbornly kept me on the payroll.

Let me qualify my previous statement: It was next to impossible for me to get fired from Smart Aid. Any other employee would’ve been out the door a dozen minor infractions ago. It was my first lesson in politics. There are three Smart Aids in Englewood, the small, somnolent beach town where I live. There are twenty-seven in Sarasota County, and one hundred and fifteen in all of Florida, spreading across the state like some untreatable rash. The reason I couldn’t be fired was that my uncles owned every single one of them. The reason I couldn’t quit was that working at Smart Aid as your first job had long been a hallowed family tradition. All my campaign of self-sabotage had earned me was an unwinnable feud with Shelley and the deep and abiding resentment of my coworkers—who, let’s face it, were going to resent me anyway, because no matter how many displays I knocked over or customers I short-changed, one day I was going to inherit a sizable chunk of the company, and they were not.

*   *   *

Wading through the diapers, Shelley poked her finger into my chest and was about to say something dour when the PA system
interrupted her.

“Jacob, you have a call on line two. Jacob, line two.”

She glared at me as I backed away, leaving her pomegranate-faced amid the ruins of my tower.

* * *

The employee lounge was a dank, windowless room where I found the pharmacy assistant, Linda, nibbling a crustless sandwich in the vivid glow of the soda machine. She nodded at a phone screwed to the wall.

“Line two’s for you. Whoever it is sounds freaked.”

I picked up the dangling receiver.

“Yakob? Is that you?”

“Hi, Grandpa Portman.”

“Yakob, thank God. I need my key. Where’s my key?” He sounded upset, out of breath.

“What key?”

“Don’t play games,” he snapped. “You know what key.”

“You probably just misplaced it.”

“Your father put you up to this,” he said. “Just tell me. He doesn’t have to know.”

“Nobody put me up to anything.” I tried to change the subject.

“Did you take your pills this morning?”

“They’re coming for me, understand? I don’t know how they found me after all these years, but they did. What am I supposed to fight them with, the goddamned butter knife?”

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard him talk like this. My grandfather was getting old, and frankly he was starting to lose it. The signs of his mental decline had been subtle at first, like forgetting to buy groceries or calling my mother by my aunt’s name. But over the summer his encroaching dementia had taken a cruel twist. The fantastic stories he’d invented about his life during the war—the monsters, the
enchanted island—had become completely, oppressively real to him. He’d been especially agitated the last few weeks, and my parents, who feared he was becoming a danger to himself, were seriously considering putting him in a home. For some reason, I was the only one who received these apocalyptic phone calls from him.

As usual, I did my best to calm him down. “You’re safe. Everything’s fine. I’ll bring over a video for us to watch later, how’s that sound?”

“No! Stay where you are! It’s not safe here!”

“Grandpa, the monsters aren’t coming for you. You killed them all in the war, remember?” I turned to face the wall, trying to hide my end of this bizarre conversation from Linda, who shot me curious glances while pretending to read a fashion magazine.

“No all of them,” he said. “No, no, no. I killed a lot, sure, but there are always more.” I could hear him banging around his house, opening drawers, slamming things. He was in full meltdown. “You stay away, hear me? I’ll be fine—cut out their tongues and stab them in the eyes, that’s all you gotta do! If I could just find that goddamned KEY!”

The key in question opened a giant locker in Grandpa Portman’s garage. Inside was a stockpile of guns and knives sufficient to arm a small militia. He’d spent half his life collecting them, traveling to out-of-state gun shows, going on long hunting trips, and dragging his reluctant family to rifle ranges on sunny Sundays so they could learn to shoot. He loved his guns so much that sometimes he even slept with them. My dad had an old snapshot to prove it: Grandpa Portman napping with pistol in hand.
When I asked my dad why Grandpa was so crazy about guns, he said it sometimes happened to people who used to be soldiers or who had experienced traumatic things. I guess that after everything my grandfather had been through, he never really felt safe anywhere, not even at home. The irony was, now that delusions and paranoia were starting to get the best of him, it was true—he wasn’t safe at home, not with all those guns around. That’s why my dad had swiped the key.

I repeated the lie that I didn’t know where it was. There was more swearing and banging as Grandpa Portman stomped around looking for it.

“Feh!” he said finally. “Let your father have the key if it’s so important to him. Let him have my dead body, too!”

I got off the phone as politely as I could and then called my dad. “Grandpa’s flipping out,” I told him.

“Has he taken his pills today?”

“He won’t tell me. Doesn’t sound like it, though.”

I heard my dad sigh. “Can you stop by and make sure he’s okay? I can’t get off work right now.” My dad volunteered part-time at the bird rescue, where he helped rehabilitate snowy egrets hit by cars and pelicans that had swallowed fishhooks. He was an amateur ornithologist and a wannabe nature writer—with a stack of unpub-

lished manuscripts to prove it—which are real jobs only if you happen to be married to a woman whose family owns a hundred and fifteen drug stores.

Of course, mine was not the realest of jobs either, and it was easy to ditch whenever I felt like it. I said I would go.

“Thanks, Jake. I promise we’ll get all this Grandpa stuff sorted out soon, okay?”

All this Grandpa stuff. “You mean put him in a home,” I said. “Make him someone else’s problem.”

“Mom and I haven’t decided yet.”


“Of course you have.”
“Jacob . . .“
“I can handle him, Dad. Really.”
“Maybe now you can. But he’s only going to get worse.”
“Fine. Whatever.”

I hung up and called my friend Ricky for a ride. Ten minutes later I heard the unmistakable throaty honk of his ancient Crown Victoria in the parking lot. On my way out I broke the bad news to Shelley: her tower of Stay-Tite would have to wait until tomorrow.

“Family emergency,” I explained.
“Right,” she said.

I emerged into the sticky-hot evening to find Ricky smoking on the hood of his battered car. Something about his mud-encrusted boots and the way he let smoke curl from his lips and how the sinking sun lit his green hair reminded me of a punk, redneck James Dean. He was all of those things, a bizarre cross-pollination of subcultures possible only in South Florida.

He saw me and leapt off the hood. “You fired yet?” he shouted across the parking lot.

“Shhhh!” I hissed, running toward him. “They don’t know my plan!”

Ricky punched my shoulder in a manner meant to be encouraging but that nearly snapped my rotator cuff. “Don’t worry, Special Ed. There’s always tomorrow.”

He called me Special Ed because I was in a few gifted classes, which were, technically speaking, part of our school’s special-education curriculum, a subtlety of nomenclature that Ricky found endlessly amusing. That was our friendship: equal parts irritation and cooperation. The cooperation part was an unofficial brains-for-brawn trade agreement we’d worked out in which I helped him not fail English and he helped me not get killed by the roided-out sociopaths who prowled the halls of our school. That he made my parents deeply un-
comfortable was merely a bonus. He was, I suppose, my best friend, which is a less pathetic way of saying he was my only friend.

Ricky kicked the Crown Vic’s passenger door, which was how you opened it, and I climbed in. The Vic was amazing, a museum-worthy piece of unintentional folk art. Ricky bought it from the town dump with a jar of quarters—or so he claimed—a pedigree whose odor even the forest of air-freshener trees he’d hung from the mirror couldn’t mask. The seats were armored with duct tape so that errant upholstery springs wouldn’t find their way up your ass. Best of all was the exterior, a rusted moonscape of holes and dents, the result of a plan to earn extra gas money by allowing drunken partygoers to whack the car with a golf club for a buck a swing. The only rule, which had not been rigorously enforced, was that you couldn’t aim at anything made of glass.

The engine rattled to life in a cloud of blue smoke. As we left the parking lot and rolled past strip malls toward Grandpa Portman’s house, I began to worry about what we might find when we got there. Worst-case scenarios included my grandfather running naked in the street, wielding a hunting rifle, foaming at the mouth on the front lawn, or lying in wait with a blunt object in hand. Anything was possible, and that this would be Ricky’s first impression of a man I’d spoken about with reverence made me especially nervous.

The sky was turning the color of a fresh bruise as we pulled into my grandfather’s subdivision, a bewildering labyrinth of interlocking cul-de-sacs known collectively as Circle Village. We stopped at the guard gate to announce ourselves, but the old man in the booth was snoring and the gate was open, as was often the case, so we just drove in. My phone chirped with a text from my dad asking how things were going, and in the short time it took me to respond, Ricky managed to get us completely, stunningly lost. When I said I had no idea where we were, he cursed and pulled a succession of squealing U-turns, spitting arcs of tobacco juice from his window as I scanned the
neighborhood for a familiar landmark. It wasn’t easy, even though I’d been to visit my grandfather countless times growing up, because each house looked like the next: squat and boxy with minor variations, trimmed with aluminum siding or dark seventies wood, or fronted by plaster colonnades that seemed almost delusionally aspirational. Street signs, half of which had turned a blank and blistered white from sun exposure, were little help. The only real landmarks were bizarre and colorful lawn ornaments, of which Circle Village was a veritable open-air museum.

Finally I recognized a mailbox held aloft by a metal butler that, despite his straight back and snooty expression, appeared to be crying tears of rust. I shouted at Ricky to turn left; the Vic’s tires screeched and I was flung against the passenger door. The impact must’ve jarred something loose in my brain, because suddenly the directions came rushing back to me. “Right at the flamingo orgy! Left at the multiethnic roof Santas! Straight past the pissing cherubs!”

When we turned at the cherubs, Ricky slowed to a crawl and peered doubtfully down my grandfather’s block. There was not a single porch light on, not a TV glowing behind a window, not a Town Car in a carport. All the neighbors had fled north to escape the punishing summer heat, leaving yard gnomes to drown in lawns gone wild and hurricane shutters shut tight, so that each house looked like a little pastel bomb shelter.

“Last one on the left,” I said. Ricky tapped the accelerator and we sputtered down the street. At the fourth or fifth house, we passed an old man watering his lawn. He was bald as an egg and stood in a bathrobe and slippers, spraying the ankle-high grass. The house was dark and shuttered like the rest. I turned to look and he seemed to stare back—though he couldn’t have, I realized with a small shock, because his eyes were a perfect milky white. That’s strange, I thought. *Grandpa Portman never mentioned that one of his neighbors was blind.*

The street ended at a wall of scrub pines and Ricky hung a
sharp left into my grandfather’s driveway. He cut the engine, got out, and kicked my door open. Our shoes hushed through the dry grass to the porch.

I rang the bell and waited. A dog barked somewhere, a lonely sound in the muggy evening. When there was no answer I banged on the door, thinking maybe the bell had stopped working. Ricky swatted at the gnats that had begun to clothe us.

“Maybe he stepped out,” Ricky said, grinning. “Hot date.”

“Go ahead and laugh,” I said. “He’s got a better shot than we do any night of the week. This place is crawling with eligible widows.” I joked only to calm my nerves. The quiet made me anxious.

I fetched the extra key from its hiding place in the bushes. “Wait here.”

“Hell I am. Why?”

“Because you’re six-five and have green hair and my grandfather doesn’t know you and owns lots of guns.”

Ricky shrugged and stuck another wad of tobacco in his cheek. He went to stretch himself on a lawn chair as I unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

Even in the fading light I could tell the house was a disaster; it looked like it’d been ransacked by thieves. Bookshelves and cabinets had been emptied, the knickknacks and large-print Reader’s Digests that had filled them thrown across the floor. Couch cushions and chairs were overturned. The fridge and freezer doors hung open, their contents melting into sticky puddles on the linoleum.

My heart sank. Grandpa Portman had really, finally lost his mind. I called his name—but heard nothing.

I went from room to room, turning on lights and looking anywhere a paranoid old man might hide from monsters: behind furniture, in the attic crawlspace, under the workbench in the garage. I even checked inside his weapons cabinet, though of course it was locked, the handle ringed by scratches where he’d tried to pick it. Out on the
lanai, a gallows of unwatered ferns swung browning in the breeze; while on my knees on the astroturfed floor I peered beneath rattan benches, afraid what I might discover.

I saw a gleam of light from the backyard.

Running through the screen door, I found a flashlight abandoned in the grass, its beam pointed at the woods that edged my grandfather’s yard—a scrubby wilderness of sawtoothed palmettos and trash palms that ran for a mile between Circle Village and the next subdivision, Century Woods. According to local legend, the woods were crawling with snakes, raccoons, and wild boars. When I pictured my grandfather out there, lost and raving in nothing but his bathrobe, a black feeling welled up in me. Every other week there was a news story about some geriatric citizen tripping into a retention pond and being devoured by alligators. The worst-case scenario wasn’t hard to imagine.

I shouted for Ricky and a moment later he came tearing around the side of the house. Right away he noticed something I hadn’t: a long mean-looking slice in the screen door. He let out a low whistle. “That’s a helluva cut. Wild pig coulda done it. Or a bobcat maybe. You should see the claws on them things.”

A peal of savage barking broke out nearby. We both started then traded a nervous glance. “Or a dog,” I said. The sound triggered a chain reaction across the neighborhood, and soon barks were coming from every direction.

“Could be,” Ricky said, nodding. “I got a .22 in my trunk. You just wait.” And he walked off to retrieve it.

The barks faded and a chorus of night insects rose up in their place, droning and alien. Sweat trickled down my face. It was dark now, but the breeze had died and somehow the air seemed hotter than it had all day.

I picked up the flashlight and stepped toward the trees. My grandfather was out there somewhere, I was sure of it. But where? I was no tracker, and neither was Ricky. And yet something seemed to
guide me anyway—a quickening in the chest; a whisper in the viscous air—and suddenly I couldn’t wait another second. I tromped into the underbrush like a bloodhound scenting an invisible trail.

It’s hard to run in a Florida woods, where every square foot not occupied by trees is bristling with thigh-high palmetto spears and nets of entangling skunk vine, but I did my best, calling my grandfather’s name and sweeping my flashlight everywhere. I caught a white glint out of the corner of my eye and made a beeline for it, but upon closer inspection it turned out to be just a bleached and deflated soccer ball I’d lost years before.

I was about to give up and go back for Ricky when I spied a narrow corridor of freshly stomped palmettos not far away. I stepped into it and shone my light around; the leaves were splattered with something dark. My throat went dry. Steeling myself, I began to follow the trail. The farther I went, the more my stomach knotted, as though my body knew what lay ahead and was trying to warn me. And then the trail of the flattened brush widened out, and I saw him.

My grandfather lay facedown in a bed of creeper, his legs sprawled out and one arm twisted beneath him as if he’d fallen from a great height. I thought surely he was dead. His undershirt was soaked with blood, his pants were torn, and one shoe was missing. For a long moment I just stared, the beam of my flashlight shivering across his body. When I could breathe again I said his name, but he didn’t move.

I sank to my knees and pressed the flat of my hand against his back. The blood that soaked through was still warm. I could feel him breathing ever so shallowly.

I slid my arms under him and rolled him onto his back. He was alive, though just barely, his eyes glassy, his face sunken and white. Then I saw the gashes across his midsection and nearly fainted. They were wide and deep and clotted with soil, and the ground where he’d lain was muddy from blood. I tried to pull the rags of his shirt over the wounds without looking at them.
I heard Ricky shout from the backyard. “I’M HERE!” I screamed, and maybe I should’ve said more, like *danger* or *blood*, but I couldn’t form the words. All I could think was that grandfathers were supposed to die in beds, in hushed places humming with machines, not in heaps on the sodden reeking ground with ants marching over them, a brass letter opener clutched in one trembling hand.

A letter opener. That was all he’d had to defend himself. I slid it from his finger and he grasped helplessly at the air, so I took his hand and held it. My nail-bitten fingers twinned with his, pale and webbed with purple veins.

“I have to move you,” I told him, sliding one arm under his back and another under his legs. I began to lift, but he moaned and went rigid, so I stopped. I couldn’t bear to hurt him. I couldn’t leave him either, and there was nothing to do but wait, so I gently brushed loose soil from his arms and face and thinning white hair. That’s when I noticed his lips moving.

His voice was barely audible, something less than a whisper. I leaned down and put my ear to his lips. He was mumbling, fading in and out of lucidity, shifting between English and Polish.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered. I repeated his name until his eyes seemed to focus on me, and then he drew a sharp breath and said, quietly but clearly, “Go to the island, Yakob. Here it’s not safe.”

It was the old paranoia. I squeezed his hand and assured him we were fine, he was going to be fine. That was twice in one day that I’d lied to him.

I asked him what happened, what animal had hurt him, but he wasn’t listening. “Go to the island,” he repeated. “You’ll be safe there. Promise me.”

“I will. I promise.” What else could I say?

“I thought I could protect you,” he said. “I should’ve told you a long time ago . . .” I could see the life going out of him.

“Told me what?” I said, choking back tears.
“There’s no time,” he whispered. Then he raised his head off the ground, trembling with the effort, and breathed into my ear: “Find the bird. In the loop. On the other side of the old man’s grave. September third, 1940.” I nodded, but he could see that I didn’t understand. With his last bit of strength, he added, “Emerson—the letter. Tell them what happened, Yakob.”

With that he sank back, spent and fading. I told him I loved him. And then he seemed to disappear into himself, his gaze drifting past me to the sky, bristling now with stars.

A moment later Ricky crashed out of the underbrush. He saw the old man limp in my arms and fell back a step. “Oh man. Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus,” he said, rubbing his face with his hands, and as he babbled about finding a pulse and calling the cops and did you see anything in the woods, the strangest feeling came over me. I let go of my grandfather’s body and stood up, every nerve ending tingling with an instinct I didn’t know I had. There was something in the woods, all right—I could feel it.

There was no moon and no movement in the underbrush but our own, and yet somehow I knew just when to raise my flashlight and just where to aim it, and for an instant in that narrow cut of light I saw a face that seemed to have been transplanted directly from the nightmares of my childhood. It stared back with eyes that swam in dark liquid, furrowed trenches of carbon-black flesh loose on its hunched frame, its mouth hinged open grotesquely so that a mass of long eel-like tongues could wriggle out. I shouted something and then it twisted and was gone, shaking the brush and drawing Ricky’s attention. He raised his .22 and fired, pap-pap-pap-pap-pap, saying, “What was that? What the hell was that?” But he hadn’t seen it and I couldn’t speak to tell him, frozen in place as I was, my dying flashlight flickering over the blank woods. And then I must’ve blacked out because he was saying Jacob, Jake, hey Ed areyouokayorwhat, and that’s the last thing I remember.