

A Dark Place

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BY BUD SIMPSON

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*I write of the wish that comes true---
for some reason, a terrifying concept.*

James M. Cain

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PROLOGUE

Derek Brock pounds the broad tip of his forefinger into fourteen year old Pearlman White's thin chest with a sadistic intensity that only a true bully would use. This is the second time this month that this has happened, but it is still only one of an uncounted number of times Derek has done this to Pearlman before this month. Pearlman can do nothing about it because Derek has just pushed him down onto the concrete surface of the school playground with a vicious shove from behind. His glasses and textbooks lie just beyond his reach; scattered like jackstraws over the hard surface of the playground.

He had rolled over onto his back just in time to see the foreboding, dark shadow of Derek Brock's body blocking the sun from his view. Derek straddles Pearlman and then drops his heavy one hundred and eighty-five pound body onto Pearlman's abdomen. Pearlman feels the contents of his bladder empty because of the jolting, unexpected pressure. Both of Pearlman's arms are now pinned down by Derek's knees. Without his glasses, Pearlman is nearly blind; but he knows without a doubt that Derek is now wearing his usual evil smile and is about to begin the ritual.

"Where'd you get them yellow, stupid looking teeth, Pearly? Old four-eyed Pearly's got teeth like a picket fence, don't he?" Derek looks around, making sure that everyone near him is focused on what he is doing. Pearlman hears nervous, uneasy; but in some cases, approving laughter and giggling from his out of focus schoolmates. They are quickly forming a

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tight circle around Derek and Pearlman now; like misty faced, shadowy demons. None of them wants to miss the show.

“Cut it out, Derek ... please! That hurts!” Pearlman tries to sound firm and in control, but the words come out as a pitiful, falsetto whine.

Derek’s response to his plea is to pound even harder on Pearlman’s chest, but now with *both* forefingers, as if he is beating out a rhythm on a drum. “If you don’t like it, Four-eyes,” Derek taunts, “you better grow a thicker skin!”

“Please, Derek!” Pearlman *is* begging now. He knows his chest is going to be black and blue and painful for the next week; just like all the other times this has happened. Whenever Derek feels the urge to show his subordinates that he is top dog of the school grounds, he singles out Pearlman White and uses him as an example of what might happen to all who would have the audacity to challenge his authority.

“Look,” a giggling, girlish voice from the encircled crowd sings out, “Look! Pearly’s pissed himself!” More giggles and laughter emanate from the crowd. A hot flush of total embarrassment turns Pearlman’s face a throbbing red.

“Hey! Let’s sing ‘im his song! C’mon, everybody! Let’s sing ‘im his song!” Derek mugs it up for the crowd and starts waving his arms about as if he is conducting the school choir.

Pearlman is not there now. He has closed his eyes and is letting his mind take him away; away from the pain and torment of his classmates. His body relaxes and his mind liberates him from his humiliation and; as if from a distant place, he hears Derek Brock leading his classmates in that hateful chorus; over and over again ... “Pearly White’s pearly whites, *ain’t* so pearly white! Pearly White’s pearly whites, *ain’t* so pearly white! Pearly White’s pearly whites ...”

Over and over and over...

Every school seems to have one of them; a school bully. One never knows what life changing effects the bullying might have on the recipient of their torment. Neither Derek Brock nor Pearlman White knows at this moment in their lives that at

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a time in the not too distant future, this intolerable and hurtful little ditty that Derek Brock has composed, will be the very last words that Derek will hear as he departs this earth.

CHAPTER ONE

Pearlman White didn't know for certain what made him do this ... just a strange feeling of uneasiness pulling at his guts with an irresistible, persuasive force. He felt compelled to stop here in spite of these negative feelings boiling deep in his guts. The voices within him told him he must get off here ... he must go no farther. He had listened to the voices and told the trucker to pull over and drop him off at this spot.

The truck driver paid him cash for his three days of work, then shook his hand, wished him well and left him standing there ... alone ... scared, and with night approaching at the edge this lonely little mid-western town called Resurrection. His only possessions, besides the clothes on his back, were carried in a badly worn, pale blue suitcase. It contained a few of changes of clothing and underwear; nothing more. He had less than two hundred dollars in his wallet. Not much to show for sixteen years of living, if you could call his past life living.

Pearly was about to spend his first night in Resurrection in this ... the only motel in town ... a group of tiny, dilapidated overnight cabins probably built in the nineteen thirties. Rotting, wooden posts held the cabins a tenuous foot or so off the ground and thick weeds obscured from view any of the local wildlife that might be lurking beneath. A flickering, red neon sign, spotted with rust, tried to stay lit long enough to spell out, "Happy Days Cabins," but it seemed to be losing the battle. The buildings looked as old and tired as the manager, a wheezing old man with a caustic disposition. His rheumy, pale blue eyes peered out over a perpetually dripping, hawk-like nose.

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The room rate was seven dollars a night and, as a faded cardboard sign thumb-tacked to the front of the counter stated with bold finality, "...PAYABLE IN ADVANCE." Pearly paid in advance and walked with slow, hesitant steps to the cabin assigned to him, opened the door and looked in. Cockroaches scurried for cover as he flipped the switch by the door and the single light bulb in a table lamp set on the floor on the far side of the room came on.

My God, he thought as he shook his head, *I think I paid seven dollars too much!* Pearly was much too weary to protest to the manager, besides, where else could he go? The other cabins probably weren't much better, anyway. So he fought back the tears that threatened to spill from his tired eyes and stepped inside, determined to make the best of it.

The floor sagged and quivered beneath his feet and creaked with each tentative step as he walked across it to the bed. Pearly sat on its edge and removed his shoes and socks. He pushed the socks into the shoes and put them on the seat of the only chair in the room, a wooden straight-back chair that was, literally, on its last, wobbling legs. It was as dilapidated as the cabin and the manager and fit very nicely into the room's décor. Pants and shirt followed and found a temporary home on the chair's back. He hung his suitcase by its handle on a single coat hook ensconced to the wall near the front door.

Maybe the cockroaches won't find it there, he thought. He collapsed, mentally and physically exhausted, onto the tiny bed pushed into one corner of the room and covered himself with a thin blanket having the musty, stale smell of previous, unwashed occupants. The bed sagged and its springs issued forth squeaks and squeals; almost human sounds of protest, as he moved his body around to make himself comfortable. He reached down and turned the light out. Finally somewhat comfortable, he lay there, the room nearly dark in the late twilight; eerily lit by the erratic flickering red light of the neon sign. Unable to think clearly, he tried without success to clear

his mind. Eyes closed; near tears, he waited for the welcome darkness to fill the room and his mind.

When darkness finally came, he found that he shared the room not only with cockroaches, but with other invisible inhabitants as well. Scuffling noises inside the walls, above the ceiling and on the floor seemed to fill the darkness surrounding him with the sound of tiny footsteps of innumerable rodents. He had no desire to see what caused these unsettling sounds, so he pulled the dirty blanket close around his neck and ignored them as best he could. Finally, he fell into a deep, troubled sleep filled with memories and smoldering visions fueled by the detritus of mental demons from the past.

He awakened long before the sun broke over the horizon and he lay there, wide awake and not moving, awaiting the coming of dawn. The cabin shook occasionally as big rigs thundered by on the badly paved road only a few yards away. He wondered about the strange feelings that had prompted him to stop here in Resurrection.

Why here? He thought. *Why didn't I stop in some bigger city? There can't be anything here for me.*

It seemed forever before the sun finally made its welcome appearance over the flat, nearly featureless horizon of mid-west farm country, turning the sky a foreboding crimson.

Red sun in the morning, sailors take warning, he thought. *Just what I need ... bad weather's coming.*

Pushing the blanket down from around his neck, he sat up and placed his bare feet on the cold floor boards. A momentary shudder passed through his body. He retrieved his shirt and pants from the chair and shook them briskly to dislodge any of the local inhabitants who may have lodged in them for the night. After pulling his shirt and pants on over his underwear, he walked over to a badly chipped, no-longer-white porcelain sink. Stains of a deep rust color coated the sink beneath the dripping faucet. Several cockroaches scurried away at his approach and disappeared behind the sink.

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The dark, corroded silvering on the back of a dirty, cracked mirror over the sink made him look twice at his reflected image. Without his glasses on, the nebulous face peering back at him didn't resemble him at all. A stranger stood there staring at him from its depths. Pearly put his thick glasses on and stared back at this hated image and thought, *If it weren't for these damned teeth and glasses, maybe I'd look half normal!*

The hot water faucet shuddered and pounded when he turned the cracked, porcelain knob. At first, a stuttering explosion of rust colored liquid splattered forcefully against the bottom of the sink, but finally, a clearer, more normal looking fluid began to pour forth. He held his hand under the faucet and waited for the hot water to appear, but in vain. Pearly shook his head and looked for some soap but it must have been in the same place as the hot water. There was none to be seen anywhere.

He sighed, shook his head again and washed the sleep from his sore eyes with the cold, discolored water. After drying his face on a grayish towel whose fibers had never known the purifying touch of bleach and hadn't felt soft in years, he pulled on his socks and shoes and headed for the door. He stepped with caution out into the dampness of the cool morning air.

Nothing can be as bad as that room, he thought. It's got to be uphill from here.

The gaunt, cadaverous old man, who had checked him in the night before was squatting, head down on the broken boards of the steps in front of the office door; elbows on his knees and forearms out straight. He appeared to be dozing but could easily have passed for dead. His colorless hands and long fingers hung down from the ends of his scrawny arms as if they served no purpose. He did not take notice as Pearly walked over to him.

"Is there any place around here that serves breakfast?" Pearly asked.

The old man's arms jumped like a nervous cat and his long fingers clenched into fists at the sound of Pearly's voice.

Startled, he looked up. A raspy voice that didn't seem as though it belonged to him said, "Didn't see you. Yeah, there's a truck stop and diner straight up the road on the other side of town. It's 'bout a mile from here." The sour smell of stale whiskey reached Pearly's nostrils as the manager motioned with the bony fingers of his right hand in the direction of the diner. Without changing his position, he dropped his head and went back to his meditations.

Just my luck, thought Pearly. *It couldn't possibly be on the same side of town as the motel!*

He sighed and started the walk through town toward the distant truck stop. The determination to hitch another ride to any place but where he was now, intensified as he walked. For a small country town, the road through Resurrection had a fair amount of traffic on it. Trucks roared through without any pretense of obeying the posted thirty-five mile an hour speed limit. At one time, the town must have been a lively enough place judging from the number of stores and businesses formerly occupying the main street, but now half of the buildings he walked past were either boarded up or badly in need of repair. A few homes were well kept, but they were the very obvious exceptions. This was a tired old town, badly in need of an economic transfusion; one of many in the mid-west.

One house in particular caught his eye. It appeared to Pearly to be the kind of home you would see in a magazine; a pretty, well-kept Cape Cod with a white picket fence surrounding a neatly mowed front lawn. Flowers were planted at carefully selected spots around the property. A wide, empty, concrete driveway led to the door of an equally pretty two car garage to the right of the house. A breezeway connected the two buildings.

It fulfilled the image of a small country cottage to a "T". Hanging from the front gate beneath a vine covered arbor, a sign proclaimed in bold black, gold lined lettering, "L. BLACK DDS." A flagstone walkway led through the arbor and up to a dark green front door which was tastefully adorned with a

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brightly polished, solid brass doorknocker in the shape of a large pinecone.

With shocking suddenness, the same strange feelings Pearly felt the night before while in the truck returned as he walked slowly past the neat little cottage. This time the feelings were re-enforced with stronger, almost paralyzing twinges of fear. Pearly felt an urgent need to run but his legs felt leaden, as if they were controlled by someone else. The fear invaded his body like a hot, cloying liquid rising up from the soles of his feet, passing up through his body and permeating his brain. He forced himself not to give in to the awful panic rising within him and kept walking at a steady, stiff-legged pace. The feeling slowly died and became less intense the farther he got from the neat white cottage until it disappeared altogether and he was left with a cold chill in its place.

He shuddered and looked around. "What in hell was that all about?" he asked himself, voice breaking. His legs felt weak and wobbly as he leaned against a tree for support. "I must be hungrier than I thought," he murmured to himself, attributing his weakness to the fact he had not eaten the previous night.

He glanced up the road. The truck stop was only a few minutes away now. Several trucks; diesel engines rattling, were in the distant parking lot. The sounds of the idling engines gave him a sense of security for some reason. The smell of their black exhausts reached his nostrils on a light morning breeze. The smell didn't offend his nostrils today. In fact, it seemed almost welcoming and familiar. He increased his gait to a faster pace and in a few minutes he walked onto the pothole filled, gravel parking lot of the diner and headed directly to the front door.

The interior of the diner belied the weatherworn shabbiness of its exterior. In sharp contrast, it appeared well lit, bright, cheery and clean. The cheerful bantering and laughter of the patrons sounded good to his ears. Pearly relaxed immediately. He needed some cheerfulness right now ... and some good food. The intermingled scents of bacon and coffee

nearly overwhelmed his senses. His stomach began to rumble to the point where he thought everyone could hear it.

A cardboard sign carefully hand lettered in bold red crayon read, "SEAT YOURSELF." Pearly looked around and headed for the only empty booth available. He seated himself, as the sign commanded, and reached for a coffee stained menu half hidden behind a sugar dispenser, a half empty ketchup bottle and the salt and pepper shakers. He opened it and let his eyes wander down the menu. Nothing on the pages registered in his mind. For a moment, he felt a sense of panic in spite of the warmth of the place. Words, words, words ... nothing but words! He closed his eyes tightly and felt the warning signs of tears beginning to fill them. Again, he fought the urge to get up and run...to where? *Where in the name of God will I go?*

"Mind if I share this table with you, young fella? All the others are taken." The soft voice drifted into his ears as if from miles away and shocked Pearly back to reality.

The soothing voice belonged to a white-haired old man badly in need of a shave. He was dressed in well worn, but clean, faded blue denim overalls and a plaid, flannel shirt. The knees of the overalls were nearly worn through. Pearly responded almost automatically, "Sure ... yeah, of course you can."

The old man eased himself into the seat opposite Pearly with a pained expression on his face. After producing a few theatrical grunts and moans he said, "That's the worst part of gettin' old ... the God damned pain! You just got to learn to live with it, though."

He reached across the table with a weather worn, callused hand that showed the effects of a life of hard work and said, "My name's Henry White."

Pearly grasped the hand tightly in his, shook it, and replied, "Pleased to meet you. My name's Pearly White."

A twinkle came into Henry White's eyes and he responded, "Bet *that* name's caused you a little grief in your life, ain't it? But anyone with the last name of 'White' can't be too bad a

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fella, eh?” He laughed and continued, “Maybe we’re related, do you think?”

“No, I don’t think so,” replied Pearly, almost taking Henry seriously, “But you’re right about the grief.”

A waitress came over to the booth and with a smile on her face looked at Henry and asked, “You’re in here early this morning, Henry. What can I get for you fellas?”

Pearly noticed her teeth. He *always* noticed other people’s teeth. Hers were perfect ... not a blemish showed on their perfect, white surfaces. He felt a fleeting moment of envy followed by a brief flash of anger.

Why her and not me? He thought.

Pearly stammered for a second or two, embarrassed by his negative thoughts. Henry, noticing Pearly’s hesitancy, interjected, “Are you real hungry, Pearly? If you are, I’ll order for you. I know what’s best on this menu for a real hungry fella.”

Pearly flushed a little, dropped his gaze from Henry and said, “Yeah, go ahead, Henry. I’m not thinking too clearly this morning.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Henry instructed the waitress. “Mona, you can bring both of us some corned beef hash with two eggs on top ... over easy. Tell the cook to fry the hash real crispy on the outside. And bring us some sour dough toast with lots of butter. Oh yeah! Don’t forget the coffee. You *do* drink coffee don’t you Pearly?”

“Yes I do,” replied Pearly, “but I want strawberry jam on my toast.” He flushed momentarily.

God! I sounded like I was ten years old, he thought.

Henry laughed again. “Then that’s what you’ll get. Did you get that, sweetheart?”

“Sure did. I’ll get the coffee right away.” Mona wrote the order down as she walked away toward the kitchen.

“Not from around here, are you, Pearly?” asked Henry. “Where do you hail from?”

Pearly felt himself relaxing in the presence of Henry White and replied, "A few states back on the main road. No place in particular."

"Oh ho!" Henry laughed easily. "A man of mystery! That's okay son ... don't mean to pry. We old folks are a curious lot. Where you headed? Or are you going to hang around for a while?"

"I don't really have a place to head to. I'm going to try to hitch another ride west. I'm going to have to get a job soon. I don't have much money." Pearly felt the words flowing from his mouth and had to consciously stop. He felt an almost overwhelming urge to tell this friendly man the story of his life.

The waitress brought their coffee over and set it on the table. "Your hash and eggs will be ready in a few minutes, fellas," she said as she flashed her perfect smile. She turned and headed for another booth.

"Hmmm ... a job's always a good thing to have. What do you do, Pearly?" Henry queried.

Pearly blushed with embarrassment. "Well," he stammered, "I ... I don't really have a ... a *trade*. I can do some things ... but ... I learn quick."

"How old are you, son?" asked Henry.

"I'm sixteen," admitted Pearly with reluctance.

"That's funny," Henry said. "I would have taken you for nineteen or twenty."

After a few moments of small talk, the corned beef hash and eggs arrived and the waitress put the steaming plates down in front of them. "That was fast," commented Henry. "Dig in, young fella. This place has the best hash in the state. I can vouch for that. I'm an expert on *that* subject!"

Pearly leaned forward, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and inhaled the aroma rising from his plate. "It sure does smell good."

"If it smells good, it'll taste good!" Henry answered with exuberance. "The nose knows and the tongue verifies!"

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They ate their breakfast with nothing more than minor small talk passing between them. When they were finished, Pearly exclaimed, "You were right about how good the hash is! I can't remember a better breakfast. I couldn't have cooked it better myself."

"You a cook?" asked Henry, his white eyebrows raising in interest.

"I more or less had to be if I wanted to eat," Pearly replied.

"Hmmm," murmured Henry as he leaned back in the booth, a cup of coffee in his right hand and a thoughtful look in his eyes. "That's interestin'."

"What's interesting?"

"Uh ... Oh nothin'! Just thinkin', that's all. You got your mind set to head west, so I guess there's no point in bringin' it up."

Pearly frowned and asked, "Bring what up, Henry?"

"Well ... it's a little embarrassin' for me to say. You see, no one in this town wants to work for me because they all think I'm some kind of a kook just because I keep to myself and don't want to have much to do with the people around here. But ... I could use a little help out at my place. I couldn't pay a lot, but there's a little cabin out behind the house a person might live in with a little fixin' up. That might offset the low pay some. If you were to cook my meals for me ... *and* you ... and help me with the chores ... well; does that sound like somethin' you might be interested in?"

Pearly took a long drink of coffee from his cup and thought for a moment. Henry's query had a nice ring to it, but Pearly felt some trepidation about accepting the offer. Breaking his silence, he replied, "That's really kind of you, Henry. But I've got to move on. I still don't know what made me stop here in the first place. I don't want to be your first welfare case."

Henry sat up straight in his seat, a hint of annoyance on his face. "Son, this ain't welfare I'm offerin'. I really do need some help out there. But ... if you're determined to move on, I wish you the best of luck."

“Henry, I’m sorry if I offended you,” Pearly responded. “But right now I don’t know if I’m fit company for anyone. It’s best if I just move on.”

“Okay, Pearly. I think I understand.” Henry waved to the waitress and said, “Can I have the check now, sweetheart?”

Pearly reached for his wallet but Henry put his hand up, palm toward Pearly, and said, “At least let me buy breakfast for you, son. You’re goin’ to need all the money you have until you can find a job.”

Pearly felt immediate warm gratitude towards Henry. “Thanks a lot, Henry. I appreciate it more than you can know. Maybe I’ll see you again someday.”

“That would be my pleasure, Pearly. I gotta get out of here now. Chores don’t wait. Finish your coffee and lots of luck. I hope you find what you’re lookin’ for.”

After Henry left, Pearly sat quietly for a while sipping his coffee. He felt a sad loneliness coming over him at seeing Henry leave, especially after the rare kindness he had shown to him, a total stranger. The urge to jump up and go after him and tell him he accepted his offer almost overwhelmed him. In the end, he resisted and decided against it. He drank the last few drops of coffee from the cup and set it down.

Damn! Thought Pearly, I left my bag at the motel!

Rather than go back for it, He decided to stop for it later when or if he managed to get a ride. *No sense in wasting any more time.*

CHAPTER TWO

Pearly spent the rest of the day doggedly trying to catch a ride west with a trucker. In spite of his best efforts, there was always one reason or another why no one could give him a lift. So there he stood as the sun set ... no ride and no place to go except to the vermin infested motel a mile away on the other end of town. Pearly sighed, shook his head and with a feeling of despair, started walking in that direction, resigned to another night of restless sleep.

A distant rumble of thunder proved to him the morning's promise of bad weather might come true. He started walking at a faster pace.

I don't want to get caught in a downpour, he thought.

Pearly made a point of being on the opposite side of the road as he walked past the dentist's pretty little cottage. His face flushed and he felt a little silly in doing this, but it made him feel better. He kept his gaze straight ahead as he neared it. No lights showed in the windows, so he cast a quick, surreptitious glance toward the house. Did that curtain move in one of the front windows? He thought he caught a glimpse of a face looking his way from the shadows within, but then it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Once again warm, tingling sensations began to fill his body! That God awful feeling of ... what? Dread? It began to take over his body again like a living thing!

This time Pearly gave in to the urge to run. He ran faster than he had ever run in his sixteen years of life and didn't stop until he nearly dropped, sweaty and exhausted, on the steps of

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the motel office. He sat there, his breath deep and hoarse, trying to get his heart to slow down to a more normal beat.

A raspy voice over his right shoulder made him jump. "Who ya runnin' from, boy ... the devil?" It was followed by a cackling laugh that ended in a coughing fit. The voice belonged to the motel manager. "You left your bag behind this morning. I figured you'd be back." The man blew a raspy, bugle-like note with his dripping nose into a much-used handkerchief he had pulled from his pants pocket.

"Just getting my exercise. I wanted to get back before the storm hit," lied Pearly, breathing deeply. "Do you have any rooms?"

The man cackled again, jammed the handkerchief back into his pocket and replied curtly, "We always have rooms. Not many people stop here anymore."

"Give me a different room than the one I had last night," demanded Pearly with rare defiance in his voice.

The manager made a loud hocking noise, cleared his throat and spat on the ground at his feet. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he replied with a sharp edge to his voice, "Take what the hell ever one yuh want. They're all the same. That's seven bucks ... in advance! Your bag is in the room you had last night."

Pearly drew out his wallet and counted out two ones and a five in bills and handed them to the manager. "You owe me forty-nine cents more. There's a seven per cent bed tax in this state. I forgot to charge you for last night."

Pearly took out another dollar bill and handed it to him. "Keep the change," he said, sarcasm dripping from his words.

"Last of the big spenders, ain't cha?" retorted the manager with equal venom.

Pearly ignored the remark and walked away. He picked up his suitcase from his old room and headed for a different cabin than the one he suffered through the night before. He didn't expect much when he opened the door and wasn't disappointed. When he flipped the light switch on, the only

differences appeared to be the blanket on the bed and the table lamp was actually setting on a nightstand beside the bed. The blanket appeared to be slightly cleaner, or a different color, than the one in the other unit. The beat up chair in the corner looked to be a little stronger, also.

"This must be the presidential suite," said Pearly to no one. He tossed the bag on the bed and sat down beside it.

If I don't get a ride out of here tomorrow, I don't know what I'm going to do, he thought.

He put his head in his hands and shut his eyes tightly. The room seemed to be spinning. The tighter he closed his eyes, the faster the room spun about him. He toyed with this phenomenon for a few moments and then opened his eyes. The spinning stopped instantly. He realized then he, again, had not eaten dinner that night.

Well, at least it saves me a little money, he thought.

He felt weary and bone-tired and decided to go to bed and get an early start again in the morning. He went to the sink to wash up and found an old, dried up remnant of soap lying there. He took out his pocketknife and scraped at it until the hard, dirty scale on its surface disappeared. He felt as if he had struck gold. He stripped off his clothes and washed himself at the sink as best he could with the cold tap water and motel wash cloth.

A sudden flash of lightning followed almost immediately by a loud clap of thunder showed Pearly he had made it back to the motel with not much time to spare. The rushing roar of heavy rain smashing against the roof and sudden gusts of wind rattling the shingles reached his ears as he finished his bath.

After drying himself, he climbed into the bed. He pulled the blanket up around his neck and reached over and switched off the light. He felt much better now. The bath, such as it was, rejuvenated him and a sense of optimism swept over him as he drifted off into another fitful, dream filled sleep, accompanied by the wild sounds of the storm raging outside.

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CHAPTER THREE

It was not Pearlman White's fault that he found himself in this desperate situation. He had caused no problems for the world. It had been his physical features and introverted personality that made him a target of hurtful, disrespectful comments from the beauty-loving and insensitive world surrounding him. Even *he* hated those off-white, splayed teeth jutting out from beneath his thin upper lip. With his mouth closed, those damnable teeth still made their presence known by protruding over his lower lip. Thick-edged glasses to correct a severe case of myopia seemed to balance precariously on his overly broad nose and this added more to his homely looks. To complete this unlovely picture, Pearlman's thin frame had grown to a gawky, gangling six feet tall by the time he became fifteen years old and it gave him the appearance of being much older than his actual age.

Pearlman had affected a slouch when he walked ... a subconscious effort on his part to make him appear shorter so he might fit into his age group a little better. In reality, the slouching drew more attention to him and in turn, even more taunts and jeers from his hateful, bullying classmates. Acquaintances, relatives, strangers ... even his own mother showed him no respect and at times made his life a hell on earth.

His teeth had caused him the most trauma. The sing-song hurtful sounds of his classmates singing over and over again, "Pearly White's pearly whites ain't so pearly white!" still echoed loudly in his tormented mind even today. He tried many times to come to terms with these feelings, but without success.

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He never knew who his father might have been. Even his mother wasn't sure. His mother, a flighty woman who loved violin music, named him after a virtuoso on the instrument but gave the name her own personal spelling. "Pearlman," she would say, "It's such a beautiful name!" When others asked about his name, he sometimes replied in an attempt at humor, "She named me after some Jewish fiddler."

Pearly was certain his unappealing looks embarrassed his mother, also. After all, *her* teeth were perfect! White and even ... they were the envy of all her girlfriends ... *and* all of her many "boyfriends." Her beautiful blue eyes did not need glasses, either. She had twenty-twenty vision. He had once heard her say to one of her men friends, "I don't know who he got those snags from. No man I ever dated had teeth that looked like *them!*"

His mother proved to him that her feelings about him were correct when she disappeared on his sixteenth birthday. Pearly got up on that fateful morning and, as usual, cooked breakfast for both of them. He went to her room to announce to her that breakfast was ready. He knocked timidly on her door but received no answer. A second more assertive knock produced no answer, either.

With extreme caution, he opened the door a tiny crack and peeked in, not wanting to incur her wrath. Through the narrow opening, he saw she was not in bed, so he called to her again. He waited a moment and then stepped inside. Her bed was neatly made, as she usually did when she got up. The wide open closet door beside her bed showed all her clothing to be gone. He turned and ran to her dresser. All the drawers gaped open at him, empty and bare. All her makeup, jewelry and perfume, usually displayed on the dresser top, was missing, also. The vacated room gave the appearance that no one had ever lived in it.

Pearly felt panic rising within him. Where was she? Where had she gone? He looked around the room hoping to find a note explaining to him where she might be. He ran into the

living room and looked further. Nothing! Nothing anywhere to let him know where she had gone. Nothing left anywhere in the entire apartment to show she had ever been there! Her world had swallowed her up and had left no sign of her existence!

Pearly stayed in the apartment for the next week caring for himself. He attended school each day, running home at each day's end, hoping she had returned, or at the very least to have left him some kind of a message. After a few days, it became obvious to him she might never return. At the end of the week, the cupboards and refrigerator were as bare and empty as the rest of the apartment and he had no money to buy more food. The only recourse left to him was to go to friends of his mother and explain the situation to them. With obvious reluctance, they told him he could stay with them, "...only until your mother shows up again!" Something inside him made him know with a strange certainty that she never would come back. She was gone forever.

Strangely enough, after only a short time without her, Pearly did not grieve her leaving. She had never known how to cook, so Pearly had become the "Chief cook and bottle washer," and it was he who took care of most of the housework. "Pearlman, do this ... Pearlman, do that!" It was her mantra; always delivered with an infuriating, helpless little whine. Pearly invented any excuse that enabled him to stay away from the apartment ... from her ... *and* from the men.

At times in the past, before she left, he fantasized about what his life might be without her. Once he had awakened from a vivid dream in which she had been strangled by one of her many "friends." The dream was so real to him that he jumped out of his bed and ran to her bedroom. He slowly opened the door and looked in. The harsh light from a streetlight shined in through the window and illuminated her bed. She was lying there, her naked body moving in and out of the dark shadows, alive and well and in the arms of one of her

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nameless, faceless men; smoking a long, slender cigarette ... squealing and shaking with laughter.

She looked up and caught Pearly peering in and became infuriated. She accused him of being, "... a perverted little sneak," and told him to, "... get the hell out of here!" Pearly ran to his room, embarrassed, humiliated and belittled. He jumped into his bed, pulled the covers over his head and wished fervently that tomorrow might never come for him. After that incident, the dreams of his mother dying became more frequent and more violent.

Pearly never received any personal affection from her. No hugs; no kisses ... nothing to show him that love for him might be hidden within her somewhere. His mother had lain around the house in her own little world ... smoking her long, slender cigarettes, issuing orders ... usually dressed in one of her many revealing negligees and fantasizing about some rich stranger in a shiny new car coming to rescue her ... from what? Pearly didn't know.

She relied on "the kindness of strangers" to pay her way in the world. These strange men paraded through their lives so often their names and faces had become a blur in Pearly's mind and a pain to his soul.

Maybe the rich stranger of her fantasy world has finally come for her, he thought, but it no longer mattered to Pearly.

Fed up and disillusioned with his life, he ran away from her friend's house two weeks later when the certainty of her abandonment finally sank in. He hitched a ride with a trucker headed westward and away from town and his old life. The trucker used him as a helper for the next few days. Then, one evening as the truck rolled through a small country town three states away from his previous life, fate...or some other mystical force, called to him. He had told the trucker to stop and let him off. Welcome to Resurrection, the sign had said.