

**“What happens when three
serial killers travel the country,
on a mission from God, to
witness the birth of the
Newborn King?”**

Find out, in the new novel,

Three Wise Men

by

NICHOLAS BLACK

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Synopsis

Peter, Brent, and Jay are like any honest, hardworking American serial killers until one day Brent starts having the visions. Their clarity is so clear, their meaning so insightful, that they have no choice but to follow them, wherever they take them.

Their path of enlightenment and violence takes them across the country as they search for meaning. And with each step they become more aware what their true quest really is. They are to destined to bring 'gifts' to the newborn King. The world is about to change with the birth of a child unlike any other who has walked this earth in the last two-thousand years.

But his time has come.

Thousands of miles away, unknown to the three unlikely wise men, a secret organization has been conducting experiments known only to a few as, The Nazareth Project.

The paths that they cross, and the lives they touch, will be both dark and beautiful, forever changed by their actions.

In this epic journey, *inspired by true events*, the things we do, and the decisions we make, will be seen through the eyes of three men who lurk among us . . . watching, waiting, hungry.

Three Wise Men

A Novel by **Nicholas Black**

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Three Wise Men

*A novel
by*

NICHOLAS BLACK

Three Wise Men

Please allow me to introduce myself.

I am a man of wealth and taste. And I have a story to tell you. It may be the most important story never told. But this story is different from what you may think you know about the world around you.

My part in all of this is as a relative spectator. Of course, I had the honor of being involved in this epic journey. But to say that this story is only about me would be to take away from how it actually happened, and the brave men involved.

How we all got to this point.

You are living in trying times. An age where information travels faster and farther than our ability to understand it. An age that has taken us all by storm, under the guise of bringing the world together . . . but all the while separating us from each other. Hiding behind the anonymity that technology has granted Humanity, people are now farther apart than at any point in human history.

Personal connection and intimacy has been gleefully traded for efficiency. What was once becoming a global community is now a daisy-chain of hubs and nodes . . . no longer needing the human contingent. A society of individuals. Lonely as a dead planet floating through space.

This world of yours, is a community of silent, hidden monsters. Some of them you see on television, some of them you read about in small, smudged print. But these are only a tiny portion of the creatures that lurk in and out of the shadows.

This story . . . this is about the monsters.

The monsters you don't know. The ones that may be nearer to you than you think. The kind of beasts that linger in the back of our nightmares, waving at us from the darkness, waiting for a chance to swim up to the surface, and do their bidding.

This is their story.

Our story.

Brologue

Dallas, Texas.

IT WAS ALMOST completely pitch-black in the claustrophobic stairwell. It was like being stuffed in somebody's basement, not knowing if they would ever come back to open the door. It was the kind of place that monsters dwelled in when they were hungry, just patiently filing their teeth down as they stalked around.

Shadows in the dark.

The half dead trying to die.

"I'm the only one lifting!" Pete barked as sweat started to form on his brow. His dirty blond hair was pulled into a pony-tale, tucked between the nape of his neck and his t-shirt. A blue baseball cap—turned around backwards—was seated firmly on his head. His jaw was wide and sculpted as if it had been carved out of stone. Narrow pale blue eyes were sunk deep beneath his etched forehead.

Depending on who you were, Pete's eyes would put you at ease, or send a cold shiver down your spine.

There were faded, yellow lights—struggling against both time and nature—to emit weak particles of withered light. Probably a complete waste of electrons because nobody in their right mind would be lingering around in the stairwell of the Red Top Inn, at this time of the night. It wasn't one of those places that you went when the sun was gone.

"You're not the only one lifting, it's just that you are on the bottom," Brent said as he, himself, struggled with his end of the body. It was ungainly. Picture a short, tanned Vladimir Lenin, with beady, curious brown eyes.

The Red Top Inn, located in Dallas's seedier south side, was a haunt for all things despicable and vulgar among men. It was only a stone's throw away from the Trinity River—comparable to the Hudson River in its near Chernobyl levels of contamination—and surrounded by everything that epitomizes moral and societal decay.

There were girls and boys, both young and old, both sterile and disease

ridden, willing to part with their bodies for a few dollars. For those few coins they would offer themselves up for any manner of sexually depraved services.

The dirty parts of our life that we all agree not to mention.

Private and ugly.

Life's dirty little toilet.

All the legitimate shops had closed up hours ago, and they bore the signature signs of such an environment—rusted iron bars from the cold floor to the decaying ceiling. You could almost hear the echo's,

“Keep out!”

“You're not welcome here!”

Or most likely, something like, “Get out of here or I'm going to call the fucking cops!”

Accenting the area were the myriad adult book stores, although very few of these neon-lit bastions offered anything that could even loosely be considered 'literature'.

“We should probably keep our voices down, fellas,” Jay pointed out quietly. “I don't feel like explaining what we're doing to some inquisitive whore who just got finished servicing some Walmart Manager.”

Both Jay and Brent were supporting the arms as they backed their way up the stairs. It was like moving furniture.

Dead human furniture.

Pete, the biggest of the three of them, was holding a bloated, fat, cankle in hand. What's a cankle? That's the part of the leg where the calve and the ankle melt together with no visual delineation between them. It could be the result of a medical condition, perhaps a hypo-active thyroid or some other such genetic curiosity. But more likely, the guy spent 22 hours a day pounding donuts, yum-yums, and other sugar-coated bullshit down his gullet. Hence, the big, pasty, white, gooey cancles that Pete was struggling to keep a grasp of.

“Hold on for a second,” Pete said through clenched teeth as he tried to readjust his grip. He was starting to get extremely frustrated. “Fucking fat mother-fucker!” he hissed under his breath.

He curled his forearms under the dead man's cancles, burying the lifeless bluish-gray feet under Pete's. “Explain to me how a dead body can sweat? Really . . . what's the science behind that?” He clenched his arms tightly, establishing a better grip. “Okay, I'm good.”

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The three of them began to move up towards the last flight of stairs that led to the roof access door.

“Smells like piss in here,” Brent said as he whiffed the burning stench of the stairwell deep into his lungs. “It's got a little burn to it.”

“It's more like a mixture of things. Ammonia, pine-sol cleaner, decomposing paint, and a kind of . . . ah, ambient odor of, like, human copulation,” Jay professed. Picture an athlete trying desperately to hold on to his youth. Dark brown eyes, thick neck, and a thin frame. His brown hair was cut short, with sprigs of gray migrating slowly.

Though it was dark, and they could barely see each other, Brent and Pete stared across the cumbersome, necrotic corpse.

“Piss!” they both said in unison.

Jay shrugged as Pete and Brent shared a schoolboy giggle. As far as Jay was concerned, Pete was more than a bit gruff on the outside, possibly bordering on uncouth. He was cut from middle-class, working stock, so it couldn't be held completely against him. But he liked Pete's brutal honesty.

Jay had run a successful psychology practice in Austin, Texas, and sheer luck had forced him into early retirement. Well, sheer luck, an addiction to psycho-pharmaceuticals, and a Medicare-Fraud indictment.

He was a cerebral man, often consumed with the categorization and classification of everything and everyone in his environment. Perhaps psychologically 'complex' is a more fitting term. He was his own jig-saw puzzle.

“What you two village idiots are smelling could easily be mistaken for urine, but has much too fruity and metallic an aroma.”

“Like you're a goddamn piss connoisseur, or something,” Brent hissed. “. . . and anyway, people eat fruit . . . even poor people,” he said as he steadied himself halfway between steps.

“Especially poor people,” Pete added.

“So why wouldn't their piss smell like fruit?” Brent posed, like a true officer of the court. He wasn't really concerned with the subject matter of the conversation, he just wanted to argue something. He was still licensed to practice law in Kentucky, and at the Federal level. Even in the Supreme Court, he would not hesitate to remind you (Although, he would admit that there was, most likely, a dusty disbarment notice taped to the door of his condo in

Colorado, along with all the other mail he'd never get to read).

Why wasn't he ever going home? Because he claimed that his house was haunted ever since he started getting visions. Something to do with screaming children in the attic, and eyes that would appear outside the kitchen window at 3 am. It was hard to ever get the whole story out of him. But something happened that sent him off the edge of sanity, and that's all anyone other than Brent knew.

He saw things differently than other people did.

"It doesn't work like that," Jay explained in the tone one uses if teaching a first-grade class something like color with crayons. Jay turned his head up and squinted, "One more flight of stairs and we're there."

We are who we think other people think we are. We all become pieces of dead human furniture, wilted and abused. Discarded for convenience. Our impressions of ourselves come from the echoes of how we imagine other people to perceive us.

"Why doesn't it work that way?" Pete asked as he stabilized the lower half of the body.

Jay sighed audibly, as if explaining this was so rudimentary and beneath him that he would rather pull out all of his fingernails with a pair of rusty old pliers. He actually glanced down at his fingers for a moment. "In your kidneys," he started, "water and other useful blood components, like glucose—that's sugar—"

"I know what fucking glucose is!" Pete reminded him in his own eloquent way.

"Right," Jay continued, ". . . so, glucose, water, amino acids, and other nutrients too, all of these things are reabsorbed into the bloodstream and the by-product is a kind of concentrated waste material called 'final', or . . . ah, bladder urine."

He paused to let his students process the information.

"And?" Brent pressed as they struggled up the stairs.

"Well, urine consists of water, urea—which is from amino acid metabolism—creatinine, some organic salts," Jay thought for a moment, "urochrome—which is what gives urine that yellowish color—and . . . drum-roll, please . . . ammonia."

Jay cleared his throat and continued, "But, what we are smelling," he

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reached his left hand out in the darkness to feel for a lever or door handle, “. . . is hints of ammonia in the cleaning chemicals, so our mind just jumps, assuming the worst.”

“Bla, bla, bla, it smells like piss,” Brent admonished. “And I could find you at least a few jurors who would back me on that. Perception is reality.”

“That's not enough to convict, though,” Pete said.

“I'm a defense attorney,” Brent shot back. “I don't need twelve jurors. I only need one for a mistrial. Just one impressionable mind.”

The door screeched open a few inches as Jay leaned against it. A shaft of brightness from the Dallas night poured in like fingers from God, illuminating all sorts of cancer causing dust in the air.

Brent thought about all the neon that goes into making all of those 'XXX' signs. Where in the hell do they get all of that? Cavemen would probably shit their pants if they saw all of this stuff we take for granted.

“Open the door, goddammit!” Brent said between grunts. “We need to hurry.” He was struggling for breath. His tanned, cleanly-shaved head was glistening from the combination of sweat, and the unseasonably high humidity level of the Texas night. Made even more strange because it was December.

What is wrong with Texas . . . don't they have seasons?

“Why hurry?” Pete asked sarcastically as he tightened his grip on Harold's legs. “It's not like you guys are doing anything, anyway. I'm carrying all the weight.”

In the strange mixture of colored light and odd shadows, Pete looked a lot like one of those old viking warriors that you might see in bad movies.

The veins on Brent's neck and forehead were thick and protruding as if they were actually worms crawling across his face and body. They were made even more surreal by the strange lights and relative moisture floating through the air. He looked a lot like a zombie from those European villages that are always getting damned. Strained, he said, “I'm about to drop this slippery piece of shit.”

“Have some respect for the dead,” Pete said calmly.

“Fuck you!” Brent spat back. “I didn't choose this fat mother fucker . . . asshole doorknob *expert* over here did. What is the problem with that fucking door, anyway?”

“I'm doing my best,” Jay said as he slammed his hips and backside into

the door to open it further. “This door hasn't been opened since the Reagan administration.” Every time his butt smashed against the thick door it would open an inch or two with a loud, terrible screech—like geese getting stepped on by golf cleats. And with each agonizing inch more psychedelic light would shine in on them, drenching the stairwell in geometric shapes and forms.

A carnival ride in hell.

It would have seemed that having two able-bodied men supporting the upper half of the obese man's body would have been more than sufficient . . . but, Harold was simply not cooperating.

A deficit of sorts was being created as Jay was attacking the rusted old door with the backside of his Dockers.

Brent was now forced to support nearly all of Harold's bulk, and it had driven the once prominent defense attorney to a point of near collapse.

The former Houston-based attorney had led an odd life, split between representing the underbelly of society, for next to nothing, and taking on high-profile clients that no attorney in their right mind would represent. Brent's theory was that: good or bad, everyone deserves an attorney who won't bend over and let the prosecutors break it off in their ass. 'Public Pretenders' was his term of endearment for the habitually lazy and consistently ineffective lawyers that worked for the public defender's office.

So, against his colleagues' advisements, he would take on the bad ones. Serial killers, mafia gangsters, corrupt politicians—one in the same, really.

There's an old saying that goes something like, 'Hang out with the devil long enough and you'll start to grow horns.'

Brent wouldn't be what you would consider a 'physical specimen' in any athletic sense, and the weight of Harold was pulling at him in ways he could no longer bear. Gravity was taunting him with slippery, salty, sweaty tugs.

“A couple more steps,” Pete offered like a high school football coach motivating his team. “Don't quit on us, now.”

“Ahhh, shit!” Brent grunted. “He's going down.” He turned his head, “Jay, are you going to open that fucking door?”

“Door's open.”

One

Dallas, Texas.

Moments later . . .

“Get your side of this pile of shit, then!”

“No way. Too slippery,” Jay said quickly.

“What?” Brent whined as every aching muscle in his entire body collectively agreed that enough was enough.

There was no stopping it. The semi-warm folds of fat skin slithered through the grasp of Brent's thin, sinewy arms. His fingers were contorted in a strange half-clench, like a trauma patient suffering a grand-mal seizure.

Harold's head and arms slid free like a well oiled hot dog falling from a child's incapable hands.

Thud!

The lifeless head crashed down heavily on the corner of the top step. It sounded like somebody dropped a pumpkin. The shoulders and arms followed in grotesque succession, plump forearms and hands slapping down in the hard dark stairs. Imagine uncooked steaks dropped from two-stories, onto cold tile. A couple of liquidy, gurgle noises emanated from Harold, almost like he was trying to make one last grand statement in his death.

“Goddammit!” Pete said frustratingly.

He released his grip on the bus driver's legs. At least, they presumed Harold was a bus driver. His button up Greyhound shirt and clever plastic name tag led one to believe that he drove buses for a living. Not now, of course. His days of carting around silver and orange-haired old Wilmas were over.

In a way, they had put Harold out of his misery. One quick death, instead of a long protracted struggle through life, until he hoped for death. At least, that was the way Pete rationalized the whole thing.

Pete delicately side-stepped the body as it slowly gyrated and squirmed its way a couple of steps down the stairwell, only stopping when Harold's more than ample ass stuck firmly between two steps. An air-brake of sorts.

He checked his hands to make sure that the silicon gloves were still intact. They were. Surgical glove technology has really come a long way in the past 10 years.

If one were to spend only a couple of minutes a day reading up on the latest scientific discoveries . . . just imagine what we could all get away with.

There were a couple of seconds of silence between them, and then it started. Quietly at first, and then building and growing steadily louder and more maniacal. It began as a snicker that morphed into a giggle. Pete looked up towards Jay and squinted. *What the hell could that freak be laughing at?*

Brent turned, quite frustrated—lawyers hate to lose, at anything—and stared at Jay, who seemed to be enjoying the heck out of this sordid affair. Being worn and fatigued from hauling Harold's big ass up seven flights of stairs, the last damn thing that he wanted to hear was Jay's cackling. Soon enough it turned into full-on laughter.

The simplest things can be funny.

Apparently, Jay found the whole thing so hilarious that he couldn't control himself. He actually knelled down, burying his face into his hands. His shoulders quivered as he did his best to muffle the laughter. Large tears had started to form in his eyes.

“Ha, fucking, ha, ha,” Brent snapped. “What's so god-damned funny, Jay?”

Jay tried to catch his breath. He stared up at them and then collapsed into laughter, again. It was just one of those horrible moments in life when you have no choice but to laugh.

“Your pills aren't strong enough,” Pete said somberly.

Brent shook his head angrily, “Why didn't you help me keep him from falling?”

“Sorry,” Jay answered, “. . . it was just too perfect a moment to destroy.”

Pete started to laugh along with Jay as they all bent down to recover Harold and take him to the roof.

“I hope you both choke on him,” Brent said as he bent down to grip the body again.

With a newfound vigor, they lifted the bulbous cadaver. Carefully evading anymore mishaps, they passed through the threshold and onto the roof.

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The clear night sky greeted them with a light breeze that immediately eased the tension of seven flights of stairs with a recently murdered bus driver named Harold.

Though they couldn't see all of them, there were plenty of stars to see in the Texas night sky.

At this hour of the evening—deep night, really—even the pimps and prostitutes had closed their doors, turned off their red-lights, sealed their baggies of nefarious chemicals, and pulled off their stained panties for the close of their work day. They would probably go to wherever it was that they called home, and lay their sore bodies down to rest.

Let the viruses amplify for a while. Perhaps they would bathe. Probably not.

As they closed their eyes, these people might fade off into a strange—maybe magical, maybe frightening—place where colors and sounds and smells and hopes all melt together . . . and they aren't ugly anymore. For a short time they could walk in that other place that we all go to each night. For those brief moments we are all brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters of the human race.

All of us in it together.

One united dysfunctional family.

But it will all be fleeting and unreal . . . without any substance. Reality waits at the end of your slumber . . . with a baseball bat, whiskey on its breath, and lust in its eyes.

They stood there silently for a couple of minutes.

Jay pulled in a deep breath as he stepped back from the warm mass of Harold. He felt a chill as his body cooled in the night air. They had agreed that, although Harold's body wouldn't cool off too quickly—as the ambient temperature was a balmy 70 or so degrees—the heat and moisture would surely speed up the rate of rot and decay.

The meat would only be good for a short time, depending on how it was dealt with.

“I think it's one-and-a-half degrees an hour for the first twelve or thirteen hours,” Brent said. “Now, that's at an ambient temperature of seventy-two. I remember it being in the seventies, tonight.”

Both Pete and Jay stared at him skeptically.

“What?” Brent said. “I did a murder case in Miami. Body was left for six hours.”

“But it's like eighty out here,” Jay said. “And the humidity's like a hundred percent.”

Pete walked around the body, kneeling to inspect one of the legs. “I don't think it's in the eighties. We're just hot from carrying his fat ass. And the humidity, I never understood that whole 'relative humidity' thing.”

“What do you mean?” Jay asked.

Pete looked up. “Wouldn't one-hundred percent humidity be solid water . . . like the ocean? Wouldn't a hundred-percent be just pure water?”

“No, it has to do with the saturation of the air with water molecules,” Jay answered.

Pete rolled his eyes and turned back to the corpse, pressing his hands down the former bus driver's thigh muscles. They were all quiet as the noises of the sleeping city surrounded them.

Pete uttered the two solitary words that pierced through the otherworldly silence, “Who's hungry?”

Jay nodded to himself as he snatched a small pill container from his pants pocket and flipped open the white cap like it was the top of a *Zippo* lighter. He didn't like the word *junkie*. This was medication, not drugs. With the flick of his wrist he sent a bluish gray capsule spiraling into the air. Its target . . . his bloodstream.

With a practiced catch-and-swallow, he said, “I'm famished.”

And the worst part about all of this is . . . these are the good guys.

Our heroes.

Our saviors.

The half-dead . . . trying to die.

Two

Washington, D.C.

Early morning . . .

BLUISH-GREY SMOKE lifted in serpentine swirls like translucent disappearing phantoms. The clouds were dark and dew was painted over everything. At this hour of the morning the passengers who had just arrived at the Greyhound bus station in Washington, D.C. were a weary bunch.

The bus, while a relatively inexpensive means of travel, is savagely looked down upon by anyone who can possibly afford any other means of transportation. Admitting you ride a bus is like admitting you date a mentally-retarded person—people don't tell you to your face, but they're plenty disappointed.

But then, economic freedom is a part of the American dream that we can't all have the luxury to share. Perhaps that is why they call it a dream—something illusive, a dissipating thing that dangles just beyond our reach, and is only enjoyed by a precious few.

Sheryl Peaton—referred to by her Physical Education students as, *Coach Pete*—awaited the arrival of her longtime best friend, Jenna Smith. Sheryl had offered to pay for Jenna's plane ticket because, in her words, "Nobody in their right mind rides a bus anymore . . . I mean, just think about all of the diseases you can catch."

To Sheryl, a ride on the bus would be only marginally safer than sharing rusty needles with a den of drugged-up lepers. She had begged for Jenna to ". . . just fly."

But Jenna wasn't hearing a word of it. She recently had a dream about a spiraling plane, and had it analyzed by her spiritual advisor, Tet. They had both agreed that to ride in an airplane after having this prior knowledge would start the unravelling of the known universe.

"I've discussed it with Tet," Jenna explained as if it was such common sense that anyone should agree, "and checked my planets . . . two are in line you know . . . and I can't take a chance like that, because," she paused for

dramatic effect, "I saw green flames for God's sake . . . *green flames!*"

So Sheryl had been given the alternate travel arrangements—ergo, the Greyhound bus—and was now anxiously anticipating her friend's arrival. She hadn't seen Jenna in several years, but they talked on the phone quite often.

She knew that Jenna would be able to guide and advise her of the most prudent spiritual course. She had a secret that nobody but Jenna would understand. But her best friend could relate to things like this . . . issues of the heart.

Jenna had a special gift for understanding people. For seeing through the facade. She could listen. Not just hear. But truly listen.

Sheryl tapped her fingers nervously on the steering wheel, her thumbs matching the bass drums in the music that was leaking out of the stereo system like semi-noxious refinery fumes.

Sheryl and Jenna had met during their sophomore year in college, at the University of Louisiana. Sheryl was slugging away at her Sports-Medicine degree, and Jenna had been dog-paddling through a major in Sociology, with a minor in Biology. In a strange twist of fate, they had discovered—at a well attended party—that they were both dating the same guy. Instead of the cliché cat fight for the man's honor an affections, they had teamed up with a pair of Big Bertha Golf clubs and redecorated Ricky's BMW.

After just 4 ½ minutes with the car they had purged their pre-Cambrian aggressions, and totaled Ricky's first real love . . . the Beamer.

Two months later, they were roommates, and they forged a close personal relationship thereafter.

Jenna had always been a bit *out there*. She was outrageous and exciting and in touch with herself. All things that Sheryl wanted to be. Jenna oozed sexuality like a washing machine filled with bubble bath gel and turned to the highest setting. She understood her body and her desires, and knew what she wanted, even if that which she wanted wasn't theoretically possible.

Sheryl, on the other hand, was much more reserved and secretive with her feelings and emotions—especially her sensuality.

She was a short, thin, tomboy attractive girl, who aspired to take control of her life and have some kind of direction. A flow that she could somehow control. She compartmentalized her life to such a degree that her pocket organizer dictated what and where she could go, and who she could be.

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She lived from one segmented page of small printed notes to the next. She was a functional obsessive.

But she was working on that.

Jenna had taught Sheryl how to love herself, and how to break enough rules to enjoy her life. From Sheryl, Jenna learned how to budget her insanity and spontaneity, channeling it into positive fiscal returns. In other words, stay in college in spite of her recklessness. She even found time to do odd things like studying and graduating. Jenna lived by the ebb and flow of spiritual energy. She was a functional rolling stone.

But she was working on that, too.

Sheryl had been waiting for some time now, glancing curiously back and forth. Briefly, the thought that something horrible might have happened ran through the back of Sheryl's mind.

Sheryl needed to be able to spill her thoughts—her guts—to Jenna. Nobody else would suffice. Coach Pete had an image to uphold. She was strong and self-reliant; quick to raise her voice when somebody wasn't giving it their all on the volleyball court. But it was all a self-serving act, little more than a mask that she wore around others—lines of strict, rehearsed prose and sharp banter to keep everyone else out of her life. When you fit the person that everyone is expecting, people don't question you. And it had worked, so far.

Jenna was not one to count on if your car had broken down, but for prophetic guidance . . . she was your girl. Sheryl needed to open up her soul to Jenna, her best friend in the world, because she had a life-altering decision ahead of her.

Three

Washington, D.C.

18 seconds later . . .

SHERYL GLANCED DOWN at her cell phone. On the small blue screen a couple of black bricks told her that she was getting fairly good reception. She hadn't missed any calls.

Those damned buses!

Unreliable and dangerous.

All types of sicko-psychopaths riding around just looking for an attractive girl like Jenna. Who knows what kind of inhuman Hannibal Lecter-type fantasies some deranged lunatic might like to live out in some rainy, dark forest while they . . .

Knock, knock, knock! The rapping of knuckles on Sheryl's window startled her. She looked up from the cell phone. What the heck? Jenna? She smiled for a moment, expecting to be rewarded with Jenna's face.

But it wasn't Jenna.

It was a security guard. A security guard with a shrewd little pointy face, and beady eyes. Sheryl pressed the button on the driver's side door that lowered the window with a quiet calculated hum—powered, no doubt, by unseen electrical do-dads and gizmos that brilliant Asian scientists had created.

“Ma'am,” the guard said as Sheryl peered out the water-beaded windshield, “you're in a No-standing zone.”

“Oh,” Sheryl said as her eyes searched around her car, “I was just waiting for a friend of mine, one of your passengers, she was supposed to—”

“Okay, that's fine,” he interrupted, “but you need to pull up about twenty feet, or so.” He pointed down the driveway and rain dribbled down his raincoat, a few drops landing inside the small space between Sheryl and the real world.

She could see the thick yellow lines that he was pointing at. The rain made everything gray and somber. Clean and dirty, all at the same time.

“This is a walkway, that you're on right now, it goes to long-term parking, and people can't get by you,” the guard said as water crept down his

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neck and in between his raincoat and skin. With each drop you could tell that he hated his job more and more. Like, at any moment, he would just start imploding, and collapse down to a single point.

She nodded, "Alright, I'm sorry. Right over there?" she pointed ahead of her car, to the designated *safe-standing zone*.

"Yep."

She started to put her car into drive and as her foot eased off of the brake pedal, more knuckles startled her. This time, however, they were on the passenger side of the car. She glanced to her right and saw two of the most comforting things that she had seen in some time.

Jenna's sparkling green eyes.

Sheryl fumbled for the electric unlock switch. Seconds later Jenna was tossing two, rain soaked, nylon bags into the back seat.

"Jen-jen," Sheryl said with a relieved sigh. "You look tired, but great . . . I mean, you look great. You always look great." She was nervous.

Jenna closed her door and reached across the gray fabric interior to hug her best friend in the universe. She even did the European double-kiss, one on each cheek.

"How was the trip?" Sheryl asked delicately as she pulled slowly away from the guard.

"Well, Jenna explained through soft pink lips and a model's tanned face, "I know why they call it Greyhound."

"Yeah?"

"It's because it smells like dog crap in there."

Sheryl scrunched her face, "Ooh, yuck."

"Yeah," Jenna continued with one eyebrow raised elitistly, ". . . like I actually thought that there were going to be dogs shitting on the floor when I got to the bathroom."

They pulled away spraying up little jets of dirty water in their wake.

Four

*Marshall, Texas.
Train Station . . .*

AS THEIR BURNT-ORANGE, half primer-coated, Buick La Sable idled, Brent turned slowly to Pete—who was sitting in the passenger seat with his eyes barely open. They were the kind of open where he could see everything distorted. Like a television where the screen is starting to go bad.

“This car smells like dog shit.” Brent wasn't being loud or obnoxious when he said the words . . . merely stating the obvious. A simple observation of the facts at hand.

Pete's eyes widened just enough so that you might have been able to slide in a dime between the lids. But it's not something one would recommend trying. Not with Pete.

“Figure the last person to own this thing had a dog or two,” Brent sniffed. “Yeah, at least two.”

Pete glanced towards the sidewalk, and beyond that to the electric doors. People were coming in and out of the station at a consistent rate. Jay was inside, taking care of something important, and would be along shortly. It was a necessary risk.

They sat quietly for several minutes.

Brent played with the decomposing leatheresque material that he imagined had been meticulously wrapped and sewn around the steering wheel by some poor anal bastard who—after having stressed to complete 20 or 30 thousand of these steering wheels, on some dank, mono-chromatic assembly line, would probably show up to a company picnic with a shotgun, wearing flip-flops.

People that get stuck in monotonous lives have a proclivity towards shooting up post offices, and shopping malls, and wives; handing out hot metal like party favors.

Brent broke the silence, “You can't get that dog shit smell to ever go away. Not completely. It's timeless.”

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Pete turned towards Brent, “Is this really something that we need to discuss?”

Brent angled his head back, signifying that it was time to bestow some sagely wisdom. “I’m serious about this. There is some kind of molecular component whereby the tiny crap molecules don’t ever dissipate. Like a turd tattoo, or something.”

“You are a profane person, Brent,” Pete pointed out as he sadly shook his head. “Your use of the English language is almost shocking, considering that you were an attorney. Don’t you guys have any couth?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Brent continued, ignoring Pete’s jab. “I was representing this burglar on a case out of Denver. He was looking at Career-criminal status because this was his third,” he made little quote signs with his fingers, “alleged, burglary of a habitation. And, see, in the Federal system they treat those as violent felonies. So, my guy, Robert, was looking at a minimum of twenty, probably more with that crippled-ass sentencing system.”

“Is there a point buried somewhere in all of your rambling?”

“Pay attention,” Brent said as he wiggled his finger. “You’ll learn a thing or two.”

“About dog crap?” Pete said doubtfully.

“About shit,” Brent professed. “This is about how dangerous shit is. This is important,” he said as he poked the leatherette to emphasize his point.

Pete raised his open palms in surrender.

It had been cloudy and overcast earlier, but as the temperature had steadily risen, the clouds had dispersed—apparently, more than the foul car stench that had elicited this story from Brent.

“So . . . all they really have is his car in the area of the burglary. No stolen property, no burglary tools, not much of anything . . . well, almost nothing.”

Brent narrowed his eyes, “They *did* have some physical evidence. As is turned out, the home owners had a dog.” He smiled, “Supposedly, Robert had stepped in a pile of canine excrement as he left the scene, and it was still odorous.”

Pete cocked his head, “He was still wearing the same shoes?”

Brent shook his head, “No, no, he dumped the shoes. They were a goner. No, it was residue found in the floor mats of his car. He said he

washed them with one of those power-sprayer-things. You know, where you insert the quarters. Told me he cleaned them good.”

“Why didn't he just throw the stupid mats away?” Pete said frustratingly. “I mean, he throws away the shoes, so?”

Brent shrugged, “Well, he's a criminal. I guess he couldn't let go. Thought he had them beat.” Brent bit his bottom lip as he moved his lower jaw back and forth. “Anyway, I objected to everything, tried to have their evidence suppressed, challenged their evidence collecting techniques, the whole deal. I set it for trial just to see what they could possibly do to make a case. There's no way that some dog shit on a floor mat is going to put a client of mine away for life.”

“Hey,” Pete said, pointing out to the street where a handsome couple—probably in their early thirties—were crossing. They both had on Khaki pants, and cute little 'Old Navy' sweaters.

Pete and Brent stared quietly as the couple floated across the light-brown concrete, and neither were sure if their feet actually touched the ground.

“People like that glide around,” Brent said as the couple moved with a gentle cadence. “It's freaky.”

There was something almost contrived about the way they walked.

Delicate and tender, but unnatural.

“Think they're in love?” Pete asked quietly, his voice just above a whisper.

Brent pursed his lips and considered the question. “Hard to tell. It's like everybody's acting these days. It's all a facade.”

As they continued to study the couple, the man suddenly slowed to a halt—just a few feet from the curb—and pointed to something on the ground. He then knelled down in that one-knee-high and one-knee-low, cover model position, and recovered the object of their interest.

As he rose, he held that special something just above eye level as if it might possess the answers to the mystery of life. Perhaps it was a diamond that some jewel thief had dropped while in a hurry to make a getaway. Maybe it was an advanced micro-chip that Bill Gates was about to unleash on the free world—thereby guaranteeing his place somewhere between Alexander the Great, and Ivan the Terrible.

Jefferson's inverted reflection bounced around by the power of the sun,

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blinding everyone by such bright, white photons that your retina would surely explode if you focused on it.

It was a stinkin' nickel.

Five cents.

Whooppy shit.

Then the guy did something that was honestly cute. He gave the shinny little nothing to his woman. She played with it in her hands, as if time meant nothing to these two lovers, and then held it to her chest as she leaned up to kiss him softly on the cheek. Somewhere, on some plane, kittens and baby ducks and puppies were all laughing and playing together.

And with a perfect timing that even Steven Spielberg himself couldn't have engineered, they sauntered to the sidewalk, and into the airport.

"They're in love," Brent said with conviction. "That's what love looks like."

"Why?" Pete asked as they stared.

"He stopped to pick up a nickel, which is pretty fucking cheap . . . and embarrassing. But he didn't just swipe it off the ground. No, he pointed down to it; made a whole show out of it. So you know right there that he's comfortable around her. Comfortable and secure enough even to risk looking like a cheap bastard." Brent turned toward Pete, readjusting his position in the driver's seat.

He nodded and continued, "Then he gives her the coin. The special little something. Probably reels off some spiel about luck and fate, and all that other romantic silliness. She takes the nickel . . . and she loves it. Might as well have been a two-hundred karat, flawless diamond. Probably has all kinds of disease and shit on it."

"The kiss sealed it in my mind," Pete said reverently.

"Yup. And . . . they're not carrying bags or luggage, so they're probably here to pick somebody beautiful up. Smart money says it's another gap-catalog-couple, just like them. Or a kid brother. People like that don't have siblings, they have kid brothers, and kid sisters. Right out of some Norman Rockwell painting. Oh, yeah," Brent said with a yawn, "They're in love."

A minute or two went by where neither Brent nor Pete spoke. Brent mindlessly ran his hands across his slightly stubbled head. He was lost in his thoughts, as he imagined that Pete was, too.

“A guy like that,” Pete said, breaking the quiet, “. . . I'd like to stab him in the neck.”