

In 1960's America, a twelve-year-old boy resurrects from near-death a man with no remembered past, until that past resurfaces and the boy realizes the devastating reality of the being he almost came to believe he created.

Leatherstone

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**LEATHERSTONE**

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*JASPER LEATHERSTONE HAD ESCAPED. A dragnet was out for him, its dogs howling through the night. At the edge of a frozen river he could hear them coming and took a chance only the most desperate or insane would. With superhuman strength he hurled a boulder through the ice and plunged in after it. His body shocked past feeling by the cold, he swam like some polar animal under the ice, and when his lungs gave out he took his knife and broke through the underside to gulp down frozen air. But the current grabbed him and tore him downstream, shattering him on rocks, dragging him to the bottom, flinging him up to crack his head on the ice ceiling, and slamming him against the submerged root of a tree. He pulled himself along the root, though the current did its best to tear him away. Smashing his fists through the ice at the shore, he drove the knife into the tree, pulled himself through the jagged break and fell on the black earth, twisting and hissing like a reptile. When the police and dogs got to the river three miles back, the trail was lost.*

# I

I was twelve when it all happened—when Jasper Leatherstone escaped Death Row and everything changed. It was 1960.

My name's John Garrett but I'm called Champ. My dad had saddled me with that name on Day-1, probably when he was told the undersized seven-week-preemie in the incubator was his son. It must have been a moment of incredibly hopeless hopefulness for him, as if the name could somehow transform the scrawny little mite he was looking at into a real boy. And I have always, even now, I'm ashamed to say, experienced a pang of guilt at the sound of my name. John's a neutral name, with no image attached, but Champ's a name overloaded with implications I felt I could never live up to; my guilt compounded from suspecting that everyone I met could see through the name into my sad, frightened being.

The scene: If the wrong side of the tracks had a wrong side, that's where we lived—me, my sister Lizzie, our Uncle Caleb, and Dad, when he was around. He was usually on the road, though, struggling to sell tools to mom and pop hardware stores about to go under because the big chain stores were just then starting up. But he kept at it, making just enough to keep us fed and dressed and going to a movie now and then. Sometimes he was able to get a little time off and would come home for a few days and then things were different, more fun. But sooner or later he'd have to hit the road

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again, and the house and everyone in it would settle back into a stagnant swamp of avoidance and unspoken thoughts.

Lizzie was seventeen in 1960, five years my senior, and a certain type of pretty, with her brown-gold hair and large, sad eyes. She lived in her own private world, a world I couldn't really understand or even imagine, because she was slow, retarded, mentally deficient, whatever you want to call it in these so-careful days when none of my adjectival list is accepted but is all apt. She wasn't a candidate for an institution or anything, just dimwitted enough that she didn't catch on to much happening around her; her attention span was seconds, her reading level about third-grade. She liked television cartoons, and "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" was her favorite song.

As for Uncle Caleb, as soon as he moved in with us he started spending most of his time in the Trophy Room, the bar at Horizon Lanes, a bowling alley in Horizon Village, the big development over on the right side of the tracks. He said the Trophy Room made the best cocktails in the state. He always called liquor *Cocktails*, no matter how it was served up, and always tried for a gentlemanly, elegant spin on the word, but "gentleman" he was not—

"This place is a fucking pigsty!" he thundered one night to his beloved juvenile charges after another day spent at the Trophy Room. "Why the hell can't you little shits keep it clean? I'm sick of living in filth."

I remember this particular time because Lizzie had spent the whole day cleaning. Dad was coming home the next day and she always had the place looking especially spotless for him. He would tell her how nice it looked and that was about all she needed to feel like the most honored, important person in the world. So when Uncle Caleb's diatribe exploded she was hurt and confused, and her

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expression changed to what I used to call her wounded deer look. Of course, if there was any mess it was his—unemptied ashtrays, half-crushed beer cans, piles of dirty clothes in his den. He'd taken over the small family room for his exclusive use, and Lizzie didn't like going in there if she could avoid it. She told me he made her feel "creepy." So it became my job to clean it up and I wasn't very good at keeping on top of it. I didn't like cleaning then, I don't like it now, and the thought of looking after that den brings on a wave of nausea in me, as if I can still smell that thick soup of cigars, beer and sweat that no cleaning ever erased.

"You two are about as useful as tits on a boar," he belched. "I'd beat the shit out of you if I thought it'd do any good." He peered at us through bleary yellow eyes, probably trying to muster up more piquant expressions and witticisms, but ran out of steam and just said, "Fix me something to eat."

Lizzie cried the whole time we were making dinner, but I couldn't bring myself to apologize to her for not cleaning the den, or for not telling Uncle Caleb I had made doing so my job. When we sat down at the table she was still crying, and Uncle Caleb couldn't stand it and told her she'd have plenty to cry about later if she didn't shut up.

"Knock it off, Uncle Caleb," I said, feeling sorry for her.

He might have smacked me for that, but just said, "Who the hell do you think is in charge here? In my day a boy would get a trip to the tool shed for talking like that to his uncle."

I said we didn't have a tool shed.

He exploded. "You're a goddamn little smartmouth, you know it? And someday it's gonna get you in big trouble. Or dead."

Anyone else would have laughed at such a threat coming out of that pouty little mouth of his in that big bloated baby face. His teeth

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were small and could only be seen when he smiled or sneered, and that lack of visible teeth clinched the awful baby effect. But I couldn't laugh. Looking at him, any laughter you had building up just went dead and dropped down into your gut and dissolved. It was something in his eyes that did it, but I couldn't tell you exactly what it was.

We lived in an old wood-frame house at the edge of the woods about two miles outside of Horizon Village, so we weren't considered real "Villagers," even though my dad's family had been there long before the shiny new town was built. Every kid I knew at school lived in town, and we were the outsiders, even rubes, because our place was old and a little rundown. I was the dumb hick whose dad was too stupid to move off the farm and into a nice new tract home like everyone else had done; the hick whose dad drove a ten-year-old car and looked down on all the hardworking citizens of Horizon Village who drove new ones; the hick with the "reetard" sister; the hick who just plain never fit in. Anywhere.

When I was ten a few kids came over because our teacher assigned us a group homework project, but our house was so different from theirs they seemed to treat it as if they were on a field trip or something. When I caught two of them snickering at the curtain hanging in front of my closet I realized they probably had real doors on theirs, maybe even fancy sliding mirrors, and that's when the difference between an old farm house and a nice new prefab job hit me. Our house may actually have been better constructed than those sliding mirror places built of glued sawdust and spit, but it just wasn't up to date. Those kids were sure there was something wrong with my parents, and with me too, for wanting to stay in our old place outside of town and not being able to see that new is always better.

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On top of being a hick, I was also pegged as a geek because of my interest in science, even though I never worked at it as hard in school as I should have; I was drawn to the *idea* of science and what it could accomplish, but was too intellectually lazy to really apply myself to the necessary math and physics. When I was younger, the experiments we did in class—growing mold in Petri dishes, desalinizing a glass of salt water—weren't dramatic enough for me. What I wanted was lightning, thunder, explosions, lights all over town blown out by the incredible experiments going on in the mysterious old laboratory on the hill, like in the science fiction and horror movies we went to, which featured laboratories crammed with amazing stuff—bubbling vials, jars full of unrecognizable things, cages crawling with god knows what. I really loved those movies when I was a boy, all those idiotic teenage werewolves and vampires on the loose. And anything to do with Frankenstein was the coolest thing I could imagine. I can't tell you how excited I got when "Curse of Frankenstein" opened at the Horizon Theater, and how I couldn't wait for the weekend to go see it. I also saw "Frankenstein's Daughter," which I liked even though it was so cheap, and "I Was a Teenage Frankenstein," which was on a double bill with "Godzilla."

But the beginning of the saga, the first Frankenstein story, remained a mystery to me. All the movies I saw referred to the famous original Dr. Frankenstein, but I knew nothing about him or his need to create life that had gotten the whole ball rolling. That movie was too old for the Horizon Theater, and never seemed to be on TV in our area, so I could only wonder how it all began, who the first monster was and why he was created. I checked out Mary Shelley's novel from the library, but was disappointed that she gave no details about Frankenstein's laboratory or the exact way his

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patchwork creature was brought to life, other than through the workings of “some powerful engine.” But in every other way it’s an amazing book, and she was all of nineteen when she wrote it.

It was my fascination with the scientific craziness of these Frankenstein movies that my so-called friends found so funny, so geeky and nerdy. I loved all the laboratory gadgets the lunatic doctors used, and tried to figure out how they worked. Part of me knew I was just looking at a movie set, but another part of me was thinking that all the devices up there were somehow logically designed and functional. You could see the electricity jumping and crackling between the coils, hear the fluids bubbling in the jars—why would they go to all the trouble of hooking it up if it couldn’t really do something?

Lizzie didn’t come along when we went to our horror movies, which was fine with me because she embarrassed me. My only real friends, or at least the two I thought were my real friends, Ken and Jeff, called her “Retardo” and “Princess Moronica.” Ken was fifteen and Jeff was thirteen and I liked to be seen with them; it made me feel superior to the kids my own age who’d have nothing to do with me. So I ignored the way they looked at her, what they said about her body and the way she fit into her clothes, and talked myself out of the suspicion that the only reason they hung around me was so they could get close to her. She couldn’t have guessed what was in their minds; she was so innocent. She was like a nine-year-old. She could entertain herself for hours playing with her cat, Fluffy, dragging a felt butterfly on the end of a string across the yard for that cat to chase, or rolling up a ball of yarn again and again for her to unravel all over the living room. Fluffy would always be the first to get bored and give up. Lizzie was so simple, so much like a little girl years younger than she really was, that you couldn’t help but

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feel sorry for her and want to protect her. So I didn't like the way Ken and Jeff flirted with her to her face and made fun of her behind her back, but I was afraid I wouldn't look cool if I said anything to them about it.

Lizzie's other friends were all "special kids" like her in our school's "special" class. The school went from kindergarten to high and was divided up by separate elementary, junior, and high school buildings, so even though they were on the same plot of land, you got a sense of moving on academically.

One of the things I always hated about that "moving on" routine was the yearly visit of some kind of state counselors who'd show up to help prepare us for the "next academic step." It was unpleasant because I never knew exactly what to tell them when they asked me what my interests or hobbies were. I remember one visit perfectly:

"Mr. Garrett, most boys your age know exactly what they want to do for a living, but you're still undecided. You should give it some serious thought."

"Well, I was thinking about maybe becoming a scientist or something."

"Or something?"

"You know, maybe a doctor... something like that."

"That's an ambitious goal. It requires a lot of study. Your Principal, Mrs. Crane, says you have some interest in science, but don't particularly apply yourself. Why is that?"

"I guess I'd like to be able to do more interesting experiments."

"Such as...?"

"I don't know. Dissect a frog or something."

"We don't do that until high school."

"Oh."

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“Your teacher says you have an aptitude for writing; that your grammar and usage is somewhat beyond your grade level.”

“Well, I read a lot.”

“Yes... but *what* you read—comics, worthless science fiction, adventure magazines—”

“Popular Science.”

“Don’t interrupt. *What* you read is hardly edifying—not to mention what we’ve seen of your attempts at writing. Why would a boy your age think of things like that?”

“Like what?”

“Laboratories, oddball experiments, hearts hopping across the floor—we got quite an earful from your teacher on *that* story of yours. You should know that there are age-appropriate limits on the imagination. You need to appreciate them more.”

“I get A’s on those stories.”

“For your writing ability, but as far as the subject matter goes, they’re worthless.”

"I promise I'll do better."

Once, after staring out the window for a long time and thinking about how hopeless I was, one of the councilors said in a disgusted way, “You’re a C-average student, Jonathan. Do you really think that’s going to lead to a career in science or medicine? I suggest you set your sights considerably lower.”

"Maybe I could be a school counselor," I said.

“You’ll never get anywhere with that attitude, young man, you’ll never fit in. Don’t you want to fit in?”

“...I guess.”

“Everyone has to fit in. It’s the only way we’ll keep America strong in the face of Communist Russia.”— Communist Russia being what adults were always trying to scare us with back then,

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along with the horrifying air raid drills that had us diving under our desks to escape incineration by Russian A-bombs. Communists were right up there with Elvis Presley and juvenile delinquents as the most threatening entities on Earth—and while they didn't scare me, they sure as hell had most responsible God-fearing adults in perpetual panic.

I was never able to do much about not-fitting-in; in fact, I made a show of not wanting to. For whatever reason, I seemed to expect life to work pretty much on my terms. I *did* feel smarter than most of the kids at school, I *did* feel impatient, and often showed it, when they didn't get some scientific principle or other, even as I brushed off the principles and theories I didn't understand. But I took what the counselor said seriously and stopped writing anything of interest to me in school, so I wouldn't get in trouble, and wrote only in secret at home—stacks of loopy science fiction stories where I could let my imagination run wild. At school I wrote only what I thought they'd approve of—stories about the little dog I didn't really have, or the value of hard work for its own sake—and no longer got A's on my writing, as it was clear to my teachers that behind every sentence was a silent “fuck you.” I stayed to myself and wouldn't play in sports because I was afraid they'd ridicule my pathetic efforts, and have more than enough reasons for getting back at me for my arrogance, an arrogance that masked the fear of not belonging, of really *not* being able to measure up. So, while I secretly wished I could fit in, I acted as if I was too good for them, and they answered me with the treatment I was unconsciously asking for.

My parents had great hopes for me, though. Trying to encourage me to develop my scientific interests, they had gotten me a chemistry set and a subscription to “Popular Science Magazine,”

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and although I enjoyed reading the magazine, most of the articles were dry and technical. As for the chemistry set, it just didn't fire my imagination enough. I wanted to achieve something that would be noticed, that would make Mom and Dad and even Lizzie proud of me, and that would show all those kids who ignored me that they were small-minded jerks, terrified conformists, and that amazing stuff could happen even on the wrong side of the wrong side of the tracks.

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Mom and Dad met at a dance and always said it had been love at first sight. They got married almost right away, and a year later Lizzie came along. She was six before they realized she had problems. When the doctors told them the chemistry of her brain was a mess, that proper connections weren't being made, and when they saw that the misfires in her head resulted in startled looks and random gasps of fear, they were heartbroken. But they made the best of things, which is all anyone can do, even when the best is pretty bad, and managed well enough. But then their friends started moving away. People in the area weren't so interested in farming any more, and were selling their land and taking off. By the time I was twelve hardly anyone was left out our way. Our closest neighbor, over a mile away, was Mr. Griner, a pig farmer. He had a successful business once, but now the few hogs he had left were for his own use. Over eighty, he was almost a hermit, and I avoided getting anywhere near his place—not only because of the smell of those few poorly kept pigs, but because Mr. Griner frightened me. Who could live alone like that, butchering and eating the only friends he had?

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In 1956, when I was eight, a car company built a huge plant a few miles from our place, and that was the start of the biggest change of all.

My dad used to make fun of the gigantic new cars. That's one of the reasons he kept his old Plymouth—he said it looked like a car, not a spaceship. Of course I didn't tell him I'd love to ride around in a spaceship. He said the new cars guzzled gas like rockets on wheels, and with their tail fins and rows of red lights, looked more suited for a Sunday excursion on Mars than for any terrestrial transportation.

To give the thousands expected to work at the new plant places to live, the town of Horizon Village was built. What farmers were left dropped their hoes and went to work making Chevys and Buicks, and people moved in from all over the state and even from other states to work at the factory. My dad wasn't interested, though. He hated the car company for “exploiting people,” as he put it, and hated those people for so willingly being exploited. He complained that once they had been self-sufficient, real individuals, but now they punched time clocks and worked on assembly lines like the robots that would replace them as soon as the bosses figured out how to do it. He'd complain that the great spirit of American independence had been hammered down to a flat conformity, a frightened *okiedokie* culture, where everything would be just *okiedokie* as long as no one made any waves. That's what he liked about being a salesman, he told us; even when the money was scarce, he was pretty much his own man. And he worked hard for Mom and Lizzie and me, and things were pretty good until Mom got sick.

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