

THE **OUTRIDER**



C. R. JAHN



Jake used to be someone once, before the incident that sent him to prison. Now he's back, his existence split between a mysterious spiritual quest within the dreamlands, and the tedium of pumping gas for minimum wage...until the Smilers showed up. This tale goes beyond dark urban fantasy into the realm of occult noir. C. R. Jahn is a bold new voice exploring uncharted territory with this nightmarish depiction of supernatural terror.

THE OUTSIDER

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THE OUTRIDER

C. R. JAHN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This will be unlike anything you've ever read.

Supposedly, my book belongs in some subgenre of dark urban fantasy, but there are no vampires or elves here, no paranormal romance, and certainly no whimsy. Indeed, the core theme seems to be bleakness and despair, with a plot involving demonic possession on a mass scale, targeting Denver's street people, transforming them into a covert paramilitary force in preparation for some unknown objective. Perhaps it would be best to think of it as magickal realism with a hard edge, similar to noir. I anticipate poor reviews simply due to the tone and subject matter.

The concept of "perfect possession," as elucidated by Malachi Martin in *Hostage to the Devil*, resonated with me, as it rang true with my own personal observations of functional psychopaths who seemed to be either psychically gifted or exceptionally lucky. Sara Gran's fictional depiction of the demonic in *Come Closer* also proved a strong influence, as well as Thomas Ligotti's dreamlike tales of an inescapable supernatural malevolence.

I spoke with a number of clairvoyants about their experiences interacting with the demonic, and one commonality was the illusion of dramatic facial change, like a ghostly mask appearing over the face of the possessed. Hundreds of personal accounts, both modern and centuries old, speak of several distinct demonic races, and describe the physical and mental effects of having such an entity focus its attention on you. The way I've chosen to depict

C. R. JAHN

the demonic in this fictional work stays fairly true to that research, although of course I have indulged in a number of artistic liberties.

The mysterious and seemingly contradictory nature of the demonic is confusing. By extension, many aspects of this story may also seem confusing. The protagonist only sees part of the puzzle, as the spirits he interacts with choose to keep much concealed as they use him as a pawn towards their own ends. As a result, a great deal remains unexplained, which could at times be interpreted as “plot holes,” although upon a second reading it may make more sense.

Many of the characters are composites based upon individuals I’ve met, but none are modeled entirely on any one person. Most of the addresses and businesses are actual places here in Denver. *Max’s* does not exist (although there is a *Conoco* a few blocks away from where it should be) and the Temple’s address is a vacant lot, so don’t bother looking for either.

Angelo’s was a family run pizzeria which indeed made the best pizza in Denver, but sadly they recently sold to a young entrepreneur who destroyed the wood fired pizza oven in an effort to “modernize” and quality suffered accordingly. *Smiley’s Discount Laundromat* on Colfax also closed their doors while the story was being writ. I elected not to change either location in the final draft, as both feature prominently herein.

Demonology is an interesting subject, especially when you take a non-denominational cross-cultural approach. I’ve studied it for over thirty years and make no pretense of understanding it, because it’s complex and multifaceted. Names, ranks, and correspondences seem largely subjective, if not irrelevant, but are included for artistic purposes as well as clarity. This book, in its

THE OTRIDER

entirety, is a work of fiction, and certainly not intended as any sort of theological or metaphysical treatise.

C. R. Jahn
Denver, Colorado
October, 2013.

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PART ONE

“Doesn’t have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn’t have a face, but it knows where to find one.”

– Thomas Ligotti, “The Shadow at the Bottom of the World”

I follow the path through the woods until it opens into a clearing. It is the greenest grass I’ve ever seen. Vibrant, healthy, pure. Pulled free of brambles and deadfall, nary a shrub to be seen. Manicured short, like a park or a campground. I know I’ve been here before, but it has been a long time. I don’t know where I am but it feels like home. *This is where I belong.*

The dog comes for me then, charging. 200 pounds of sinew and fangs. It leaps and hits my chest hard and we go down. He loves me. I hold him tight as he covers my face in kisses, tears streaming freely. He has been dead for over three years now and was my truest friend. The only one I could ever trust completely. I get back to my feet to face the dead man and the dog chases after a pair of happy puppies frolicking on the grass.

My Da is smiling. His glasses are gone, he looks about forty years old, maybe thirty-five, and there isn’t a cigarette in his hand. He seems at peace. I do not recognize the woman beside him, but they belong together and it is right. My Grandfather looks about fifty and has trimmed down a bit. He smiles and scratches his spaniel behind the ears. That dog was evil incarnate and hated everyone but him and Gram, but seems perfectly calm and sane now.

C. R. JAHN

My Da takes a sip of his beer. The woman hands me one. It is cold and fresh and tastes of wheat and dandelions. The brown glass bottle has no label and never did.

"There'll always be a place for you," he says.

BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP!

The scene dissolves and I hit the snooze button. I drift back to random images bereft of Significance. The alarm sounds again. I stand, threadbare sheet falling away, once white, now grey and sour with old sweat.

My eyes focus and take in the dingy studio apartment: the torn mattress on the linoleum floor, the thrift store bookshelf stacked with thirdhand paperbacks, the red plastic bucket in the corner. I walk to the bucket, reaching inside, pushing aside the spray cleaner, paper towels, and trash bags to grasp the tool hidden beneath. The gateway. The key.

I thumb the hammer partway and spin the cylinder once before locking it back to full cock and reversing my grip. The steel emits a familiar tang as it rests against my tongue that I find comforting, soothing...I close my eyes and visualize green grass and puppies.

clack!

It appears I have stuff to do today. I toss the pitted Bulldog .44 back in the bucket and trudge into the kitchen to switch on the coffeemaker and fire up the kettle for instant oatmeal.

* * *

THE OTRIDER

I work at *Max's Petrol*, the last full service gas station in Denver. No self-serve, no mechanic, no plastic. It's been largely unchanged since the Forties and remains an anachronism.

Although its location at 8th and Washington puts it near the center of Capitol Hill, the hipsters stay clear. We don't sell flavored iced tea or organic cigarettes, and we're not noted for our customer service, as reflected by the dozens of one star reviews on Yelp.

Half the lights are burned out and the once white building looks like someone wiped their ass with it...I don't think it's ever been hosed down, let alone power washed, and the original paint is grimy enough to be indistinguishable from the patches of concrete stripped bare by the Colorado sun. The flat roof has a layer of rotting leaves a foot deep. I'm guessing...no-one's ever gone up there to check, but there's a lot. A small shrub has even taken root in the humus.

Business is slow. I spend most of the day in the office trying to stick a few dull and blunted throwing stars in a pizza box nailed to the wall. It would be easier if they weren't bent from years of rebounding off cinderblocks and asphalt.

I hear the straight pipes from blocks away. There are nearly fifty clubs in the greater Denver area and they're all different, so you never know what to expect until you see the patch. When they roll up to the pumps I recognize the colors...Regulators.

The Regulators are a local unaffiliated one percent club rocking that old school 1970s dirtbag look: unshaven, unwashed, grime caked denim cut offs, usually loaded on booze or weed. Their patch looks like a child's art project, one they got a C minus on, and sorta resembles a pair of crossed sixguns and a bottle of whiskey...a winning combination indeed.

There are five of them, astride battered ratbikes covered with flat black *Krylon*, peeling stickers, and road burn...ballpeen

hammers strapped to triple trees with bungee cords. They ignore me and help themselves to the fuel. I note that a couple of them have lit cigarettes.

“Hey,” one of them slurs, “Gimme a Red Bull and a pack of Camel Filters.”

“You do not want to fuck with me today,” I warn him. He freezes, then turns towards me slowly, eyes hidden behind black dime store shades. He grins, turning to his brothers for support.

“He says he doesn’t want us to fuck him.” They laugh. I see the flash of metal as he rushes me, arm swinging downward...*kerambit*.

I spin on my heel, sidestepping the slash of the small hooked blade, flipping *balisong* as I pull it across his belly to unzip his guts, but twisting my grip at the last moment to connect with the flat rather than the edge. The point tears a rent in his T-shirt and a few small dark spots slowly spread.

“You motherfucker! You cut me! Fuck!” He pulls up his shirt...it’s just a scratch. His brothers laugh again. He folds the blade of the cheap flea market knife, clipping it back inside his front pocket.

“Don’t be a pussy,” Tattooface advises him. Vulture approaches and offers me a hit off his joint, which I accept to be polite. It tastes like burning plastic and sears my throat. I start hacking convulsively, which they find hilarious.

“What the fuck? Are you shitheads smoking lawn furniture now?” I pass it back.

“Naw, we rolled a few Black Diamonds up in this. It makes the ride more interesting.”

“What’s that?”

“Dunno. Sumpthin’ new.” He hits it again and passes it back. I look down at the joint dubiously.

THE OTRIDER

“This isn’t that bath salts shit, is it? I can’t be freaking out at work and chewing people’s faces off.”

“Naw, it ain’t like that at all...this stuff is good...it gives you all this *energy* and you see trails and hear music and shit.”

“Really? What kind of music?”

“Polka,” Vulture mutters, hanging his head in shame.

“I just hear, like, factory noises...buzzing and clanking and shit,” Tattooface says. Billy is still pissed off about his shirt, but takes the joint, hits it, and passes it on before disappearing into the office. He comes out a few minutes later with a *Red Bull* and his smokes.

“Checks ain’t here yet?”

“No, Max said they’ll be here by six.”

“Bank will be closed by then.”

“You’re not supposed to cash it ‘til tomorrow.”

“Fuck!” He holds up the stuff in his hands. “Add this to our gas tab.”

“Alright.” They fire up their bikes and roar up 8th in tight formation, likely heading for one of the pubs on South Broadway.

Medical marijuana is a major industry here in Denver and there are hundreds of strains readily available, many of which I’ve sampled. While I’m certainly no connoisseur, I’m familiar with *sativas*, *indicas*, hybrids, and every type of hash, as well as crap like *salvia* and *datura*. I know how different herbs make you feel. This isn’t a weed buzz I’m feeling. Not a weed buzz at all...more like ‘shrooms, but different.

My field of vision expands and everything seems sharper, magnified. I become aware of a ball of tension right behind my forehead, swollen, pulsating, squirming...something is definitely moving inside my brain, twitching, fluttering, awakening. My gut clenches as the world shifts and everything snaps grey. Icewater shoots through my spine and I close my eyes...when I open them

C. R. JAHN

again I'm seeing everything through a black and white filter. I shake my head and blink...colors are gone.

The thing in my head unravels like a knot and the tension drains. Colors return, flare, brighter, richer, more complex. Suddenly, my vision blurs, chest tightening, heart fibrillating...I can't believe this shit, I'm having an allergic reaction and going into anaphylactic shock!

I stagger to the office, ripping the first aid kit off the wall, dumping it, popping open a plastic bottle and chewing several aspirin, washing the bitter paste down with half a cup of forgotten coffee, following them with a couple Benadryl and focusing on my breathing exercises. After a few minutes, things come back into focus and my heart rate stabilizes...probably just another anxiety attack.

I dump the tepid coffee and pour myself a fresh cup. This is from my own private stash of Sumatran that I hide up in the dropped ceiling. Half a pound costs more than I make in tips all week, and those other screwups are happy with whatever is on sale at Wally World in the big tin can. There's a 5 pound can of *Maxwell House* sitting beside the coffeemaker, but that poison sears my bowels and gives me the shits...I can't drink it.

I tear open a few packs of raw sugar and stir it in before retrieving my pint of *Horizon* Organic Half & Half from the back of the cooler, behind the bottles of expired *Strawberry Quik* that no one ever buys. It is essential to have at least one positive experience each day, and lately for me that's been limited to good coffee. I chug it quickly and immediately feel better.

The remainder of my shift is a dreamlike blur. Boots sink into asphalt as if it were foam rubber, customers' voices seem muffled and distant, and I see shadows darting in the corner of my eye...but it feels real nice, fuzzy around the edges, the way Demerol makes you stop giving a fuck entirely.

THE OTRIDER

I'm extra careful making change, as not giving a fuck has its limits. Eventually I realize that I should've cut the lights and turned off the pumps fifteen minutes ago, so I do that, jot down the readings, bag the receipts, and leave the morning shift's till in the cash drawer. I punch out, set the alarm, and lock up. It's a long strange walk home.

* * *

I have difficulty getting to sleep. I feel agitated, tense. Every time I close my eyes it feels like someone is shining a powerful flashlight in my face...I swing up my arms, eyes snapping open, flashing back to the night those cops beat me in the park, but there is nothing but darkness...yet something in the darkness is shifting, churning, fulminating.

I finally drift off to sleep and wake with a start, wind knocked out of me...I swear I must've dropped onto the mattress after floating motionless a foot above it. I keep my eyes clenched shut, waiting for the patterns to emerge, geometrically shifting like a kaleidoscopic lotus Mandela, but all I'm getting are angry red sparks, then I'm falling through a tunnel, down through the levels, into the sewers and past them, further than I've ever been.

I am walking through the endless subbasement of a housing project, pipes overhead, but there are public restrooms down here too, and a huge institutional kitchen. The walls and ceiling are peeling, rotted, deteriorated; everything covered in spongy layers of thick ochre mold, with an occasional spray of chalky pink or green. I wade through a putrid miasma of fermentation and decay, air no doubt filled with parasitic spores. I Will my shield to full strength, aura solidifying into flexible plate armor with breathing filters, before continuing.

I thought I'd been to the foulest levels of the low Astral before, but I'd never seen anything like this. I walk for miles,

C. R. JAHN

expecting the attack to come at every turn, but it never does. Nothing has lived down here for a very long time...even the earwigs and centipedes seem to have fled. There are no doors, no stairs, not even a ladder; nor are there light fixtures, just a dim phosphorescence emanating from the thick carpet of mold. There are no sounds, even my footfalls are silent. I have never felt so completely and utterly alone.

I awake soaked in sweat, shivering, ill, throat hoarse from dryness. I stagger to the kitchen and get the medicine from the freezer...a fifth of *Absolut*, murky with a dollop of pureed ghost peppers. I give it a couple of shakes before twisting off the frosted cap and tilting it back, feeling the Fire & Ice pour down my gullet, pooling in my empty stomach. Eyes snap wide, gut rebels, limbs cramp, the carcass practically goes into seizure. I take full control.

I light a burner on the stove and get the sage wand smouldering, blowing on embers hard until the apartment is filled with smoke, fumigating Astral and Ether...then I lift the oversharpened *Chicago Cutlery* chef knife from the drawer and start scraping at the usual attachment points.

Something is trying to take root. Something is trying to pull me to a place I've never been, and I think it was a combination of luck and panic that kept me from getting pulled further, possibly trapped, leaving my body in coma. I have no doubt there are worse Hells than the Endless Basement of Mold, and it felt like someone threw me a lifeline at the last possible moment before I was dragged to my final destination. I take another slug of the peppered vodka. I know what I need to do.

I type up a quick text to the Goddess and glance at the clock. 4:44. It is Tuesday, it will be slow. I type: *10:00?* and hit send, then fall palms first to the linoleum floor for my first set of fifty pushups.

THE OTRIDER

* * *

I hold her close, one hand dampened by sweat beading in the hollow at the base of her spine, fingers of my other hand entwined in her hair. She smells of lavender. We are one, within the same shell, a free flow of energies, thoughts, and other contaminants. We filter our lives through each other: pain, regret, sorrow, rage. I press myself deep and hold, feeling the star blazing into nothingness, gazing into her empty hungry eyes.

“At this moment, you are everything to me...I wish you could love me.” She convulses, clenches, every part of her squeezing me tight as she’s racked with tremors.

“At this moment, I *do* love you,” she pants softly in my ear. We kiss, and it is beautiful and pure and real and True. I gaze into her eyes again, and this time I actually see a person...the girl she once was, what might have been, what can never be...and a single glistening tear. We kiss again, and I hold her tenderly and whisper in her ear.

“I would die for you.”

“I know you would...that is so fucking hot.” She starts riding me hard, pumping, like a machine. I want her to relax and slow down.

“Tell me you love me...even if it isn’t true.”

“I love you.” The emptiness returns. I want to look in her eyes but she’s looking at the clock. She pumps faster, flushing, sweating, constricting...I push her back, putting her legs up, stretching them back, giving her long even strokes as she loses control and cums hard.

“*Oh, shit...I love you so much, Jake.*” It sounds like she means it this time...but it’s always fleeting. I empty myself into her, a chalice overflowing, and kiss her sweetly, exhausted, drained. We lay together for a long while, unspeaking.

C. R. JAHN

“It’s always so special with you. You’ve always been incredibly sweet to me. You’re the only guy I rawdog anymore, and I only bill you for a half, no matter how long you stay...you’re the closest thing I’ve got to a boyfriend right now and that’s the truth.” I try to ignore the bullshit coming out of her mouth, holding tightly to the illusion of our love. We kiss again. Now I look at the clock.

“It’s nearly one thirty...you feel like goin’ for a ride, maybe getting some Chinese?”

“Can’t. I got a regular scheduled for three and he’s a real big tipper. You need to go, love. See you next month?”

“Probably. Yeah. I’ll call you. Here’s something to help with bills and something for your head,” I hand her a Franklin and a gram of hash. “I need to take off.” I feel bitter, my blood sugar has crashed and I need some air. I see myself out.

* * *

I fire up the bike and pop the clutch, bald rear tire spinning, smoking, screaming. The bobbed Honda goes sideways out of the parking lot. I clench the tape wrapped dragbars and push the old 750 hard, swooping across lanes at double the posted limit as I burn down Evans.

Yellow changes to Red and the front wheel lifts as I downshift and punch it, missing a *Metro Taxi* by mere inches as I veer through the traffic crossing the intersection. I hear brakes screeching and the dull crunch of bumper hitting bumper, but that’s a block behind me now, no longer my problem.

By the time I reach Federal I’ve slowed to a normal speed. I head North, towards *El Padrino*. A steak burrito and a couple double Jack & Cokes is what I need...and maybe some flan.

* * *

THE OTRIDER

A few hours later I pull into *Max's*, half drunk and smoking a joint. I am so past giving a fuck at this point, but I'd promised Billy I'd cover for him from 6 to close so he could do a club thing. The kickstand on the flat black CB750 snapped off when I hopped the curb and nearly dumped it after dinner, so I roll alongside the building and lean it against the wall. I should probably roll it inside but I'm not feeling up to that level of exertion right now. Billy glares at me.

"I was startin' to think you weren't gonna show."

"It's ten minutes 'til 6." The wind has knocked the cherry from the joint...I fumble with my *Bic* and relight it. It tastes stale.

"You are fuckin' polluted. Are you too fucked up to work?" He takes the joint from me, burning the remainder to ashes with a single toke before popping the tarry roach in his mouth and swallowing it.

"I'm only pumping gas, not driving the ambulance." He cocks his head, regarding me strangely. I don't know why I said that. I never talk about that. It's been a couple years since I'd driven the bus. They took that away once I was locked down. You get your name in the paper for the wrong reason and everyone turns their back on you. Now I'm in the trash bin with the rest of the animals.

"Are you alright, Brother?" I look at him and he seems genuinely concerned. I sober quickly, touched and humbled.

"It's cool. Just had a bit too good of a time. I've got this...you go do your thing." He nods, satisfied.

"Right on." He walks into the office to punch out and I follow, looking for my timecard. By the time I find it I hear him firing up his battered Pan-Shovel and taking off down 8th. I climb up on the desk, sliding aside a ceiling tile to secure my dwindling stash of *Dazbog* Sumatran, and prepare a fresh pot of strong coffee.

C. R. JAHN

* * *

Around 8:30 Matt shows up. I don't think Matt has had a shower since he was admitted to *Denver Health* after being hit by that car last Winter. I smell the stench of rancid grease and unwiped asshole from thirty paces away. It serves as a force field of sorts, keeping the usual predators at bay. Besides, Matt is over six feet of crazy and seldom has more than a pocketful of change and a flask of *Wild Irish Rose* to his name...that, and the slender folding fish knife he's fond of waving about when he's in his cups and the moon is full.

Everyone on the street knows not to mess with Matt, as he's been barred for life from all the shelters, eats roadkill grilled over an open fire, and has slept under a bridge next to the Platte for the past five years with no apparent ill effects. Most of the street crazies on Colfax are just playing a role, in hope of gaining sympathy or instilling fear, but Matt is crazy for real. He also is unfailingly polite and always has cash, so I like him better than most of our regular customers.

"Hello, Jake! How are you today?" I look at his smiling face, blue eyes shining brightly. This raggedy guy with his matted red hair, long beard encrusted with remainders of several meals, and mudstained trenchcoat he'd been sleeping in. Like I'm gonna tell the troll under the bridge that my life sucks and I've had a rotten day. I got laid this morning, had a steak burrito, and rode my motorcycle hard for hours. Thank you, Matt, for reminding me that my hopeless existence really isn't that bad in comparison to yours.

"Things are going okay now that I've gained a clearer perspective. You want your usual?"

"Indeed." I go to the cooler and get him a bottle of *Arizona Green Tea*. Unlike the other street rats, Matt never buys cigarettes, energy drinks, or candy. Just green tea from us and

THE OTRIDER

Sriracha hot sauce from the market on 6th, to hide the taste of whatever spoiled discards he scavenges from the dumpsters around Capitol Hill. That's probably why he seems so much healthier than most of them. An urban mountain man with the constitution of a billy goat.

He meticulously counts out a dollar and thirty-five cents in dimes and nickels. He has something against pennies. Whenever he gets pennies for change he invariably dumps them in the take a penny dish, saying, "Someone might need those." Today, however, he has exact change. He reaches into his grimy trenchcoat, producing a paper wrapped *McDonalds* burger.

"You hungry? I got a few extra cheeseburgers if you want one."

"I already ate, but thanks."

"You sure you don't want it for later?"

"No, I'm good." He nods and stuffs it back in his pocket before zipping the tea deep in his backpack. It's a metal framed mountaineering pack that probably retailed at well over two hundred bucks. The yuppies are always donating brand new backpacks and parkas to the dozens of local outreach programs, which is one of the many reasons homeless are bussing here from all over the country. Denver's official policy of "Hug-A-Bum" guarantees that everyone will get food, clothing, and medical care...as long as they are actually on the street. If you're working two part-time minimum wage jobs, and can barely afford canned ravioli after paying rent, they could give two shits about you.

When I had my first heart attack a few months back, I needed to wait a month to see a cardiologist, and he refused to do any tests beyond blood pressure and EKG because I didn't have insurance...but if I was some homeless on Public Assistance you'd bet I'd get a full series of tests, several scripts, and regular follow up visits. But I digress.

C. R. JAHN

Denver apparently has become the homeless Mecca of the United States, and they have overrun Capitol Hill and Downtown like vermin...which is probably why so many shelters and soup kitchens have been firebombed lately. It's not "declining property values" and "public nuisance" offenses; people are pissed off about the smash and grabs, burglaries, and strongarm robberies that occur all day, every day, but are never reported in the *Denver Post*.

The arsonists' identities remain a mystery. They're blaming it on "skinheads," but the skinheads were run out of Denver over a decade ago and haven't made a comeback. Most of the working class has since relocated to Aurora and Lakewood, as Capitol Hill was gentrified and rents doubled, so now those same buildings are filled with petulant emaciated hipsters incapable of violence, let alone vigilantism...hell, most are probably incapable of a single pushup.

"I hear tell that a new shelter is opening up. A big one up near Commerce City. It's supposed to be open all day long for job training and stuff, and I hear tell that once you're in, you're in...none of this wait in line for five hours bullshit every night to see if they pick your number for a cot. If I get my shit together maybe I won't get kicked out of this one."

"Well, you're gonna need to get some clean clothes from the Sally and take a shower if you want to impress those folks. You can use the hose out back anytime you want, and I can give you a towel and some soap when you're ready."

"That's okay, I can just use the sink in the bathroom."

"You wash your balls in my bathroom and this'll be another place you're banned for life from. Besides, the hose is a lot better. Rinsing off is the only way you'll get clean."

"Thanks, Jake! I really appreciate this! You have a great night!" And then he spins and lumbers off, arms swinging at his

THE OTRIDER

side, letting everyone know HE owns that sidewalk. His stench remains. I prop open the door and get the *Lysol* from the bathroom.

* * *

Once again, I find myself in the Hell of Endless Doors. It has been a recurring dream I've had hundreds of times from as far back as I can remember. Often it starts outdoors, on a suburban sidewalk or a gravel path through a park. Then I find myself drawn to a massive structure, typically a hotel, but sometimes a school. As usual, there are very few people here, and they have little apparent interest in me, keeping to themselves.

I start walking down a wide hallway with tall ceilings. I pass ornately carved double doors that open into ballrooms, banquet halls, and auditoriums, all empty. I continue exploring, the hallways becoming narrower, the doors smaller, presumably leading to apartments or offices, all unoccupied, most stripped of furnishings. Invariably, the doors are unlocked. Occasionally there is a stairwell, an elevator, a ladder, or a ramp...usually only leading downwards...deeper.

Soon, wood paneling and carpets become institutional pastel paint and concrete floors, the rooms now windowless cubes, and it's obvious no-one has been on this level for a very long time...it's an abandoned wing and I am utterly alone.

Eventually, the floor, walls, and ceiling become bare stone, the doors rough hewn boards with wrought iron fittings. Everything is surprisingly clean. I am unafraid, even though I'm completely lost. I'm searching for something, or someone, but haven't the vaguest idea of what or who...I'll know when I find it, but in hundreds of attempts I've rarely come close. As usual, the dream seems to last for days.

C. R. JAHN

I awake drained and confused, calves tight as if I'd walked for miles, mouth parched. The alarm is about to sound so I switch it off, then rise from the mattress and stagger into the kitchen to switch on the coffeemaker.

* * *

The day starts off uneventful. It's dead until the noontime rush, then tapers off until three when shifts change, and remains busy until seven...then it is dead again. The usual pattern.

Billy had stashed a few joints in the usual place so I light one up. Plastic. They're laced with that Black Diamond shit that bends my head and gives me bad dreams. Acrid black smoke rises from the cherry, reeking of industrial accident. Word on the street is it's some sort of long lasting synthetic DMT. I feel the tarlike residue gumming up my lungs with every inhalation, but it doesn't make me cough this time.

My lips and tongue go numb...that can't be good. Pain shoots down my left arm and my legs go weak. I chew up a few aspirin and pinch out the joint, leaving it in the ashtray for now. I won't be finishing that tonight. Two hits fucked me up last time, I think I had four or five just now. It should be okay. After all, there is a fresh pot of coffee brewing and two slices of garlic pizza left...

* * *

At first I thought the office was on fire due to the smoke...but it was only the ceiling dissolving into mist, swirling, churning...then a rent tears through from the Other Side and glistening eyes the size of basketballs spill out. I throw up my arms to protect my face but nothing hits me. When I look again, the ceiling tiles are back in focus.

I relax and look out the window...still no customers, which I'm grateful for. I hear whirring, like the sound of a ceiling fan

THE OTRIDER

slightly off balance, and look up. The swirling white mist is back. I decide it's time to step outside for a clove.

After an hour, I've managed to convince myself that the shadowman lurking behind the empty shelves at the far end of the office is not real...or at least he's finally left the building. A critter that looks like a grey dust bunny but moves faster than any mouse hops over my boot and zips along the baseboard. A black bumblebee slowly flies across the room, disappearing into the wall, and I clearly hear the buzz, even feel the air vibrate as it passes my ear.

I'm not entirely certain these hallucinations aren't actually "real" on a different plane of consciousness. It almost seems as if I'm able to peer between dimensions, spotting fauna of the Ether which regularly pass us by unnoticed. Several times I spot flames, but it's nothing more substantial than a brief flurry of red and orange sparks, spinning in a column before dissipating. That column of red sparks is something I've seen before, in dreams. It only manifests in dark corners, well away from the lighted pumps.

I see the customers differently now. It's as if their false masks are stripped away, allowing me to view their True selves, their hidden thoughts, suppressed traumas, secret vices.

That sweet old woman in the blue Cadillac with the Jesus fish on the trunk always smiles, says, "God bless you," and tips a dollar. Now I see she's filled with hatred: raw, unfocused, directed at everyone, including me. She does those things because she feels obligated to...and she resents it.

She thinks the fact I work at a gas station is proof of my wickedness, because God rewards good people who work hard with success. Her conviction on this point is strong. She gives me a dollar only after having me check her oil and squeegee her

windows. Sometime she asks to have her tire pressure checked too.

Her new car that she hardly drives never needs oil, and those tires never need air, and I often see her pulling into the car wash down the block right after she has me clean her windows. It is a game to her. She needs to make me *earn* that dollar. I now realize I have a duty to piss in that squeegee bucket every night. Perhaps I'll need to start carrying a license plate screw in my pocket as well.

Another regular customer pulls in, driving the familiar Dodge stationwagon with fake wood panel decals peeling off and glass Mardi Gras beads dangling from the rearview. As always, his wife sits beside him with their daughters in the back. They're all smiling, laughing, holding their *McDonalds* pseudo-milkshakes that taste nothing like ice cream but give you brain freeze and barely creep through the straw no matter how hard you suck. Their laughter rings hollow, weary.

I gaze into his watery eyes, taking in the creepy smile, awkward movements, furtive glances. Yes, his daughters know all about sucking. He thinks of them as property, and knows they'll never tell. His wife, with her thinning hair and sunken cheeks, will never tell either, nor will she protest or seek any sort of "help." She doesn't even think of it as abnormal. After all, her Dad did the same to her and her sisters, as did her brothers. Her cousin took her away from them for good, and between his two jobs and the EBT card they're practically respectable now, as far as she's concerned.

I take all this in with a cursory glance, seeing so much that had never registered before. I'm sickened and enraged, compelled to grab a handful of that bleached blonde mullet and yank his head out the window so I can saw his throat open with my knife. *My knife...* I look down and see it already in my hand, unopened.

THE OUTFRIDER

He's babbling inanely about some popular television show I've never watched and hasn't noticed. Discretely, I slip it back in my pocket and take his seven crumpled dollars before pumping two gallons of the cheap stuff. I neglect to clean the windshield and he doesn't seem to notice that either.

The next customer is dressed like a stripper on her way to one of the classier clubs Downtown, like *Diamond Cabaret*. She's driving a new Jeep Wrangler with the top and doors off, and her fancy shoes probably cost more than a week's pay for me. She has a small wooden bowl clenched between her naked thighs that she'd been hitting while driving, but doesn't offer me a toke.

I gaze into those green eyes and see the intelligence, the Graduate degree, and the fact that she'd realized she can earn more in a few hours on stage than by working 9 to 5 at the office all week long, at least while she's still young. She doesn't tip, but flashes a genuine smile and talks to me almost like a friend before paying for her gas with a crisp folded twenty, exact change, and slowly driving off. I was so distracted I forgot to get the money in advance.

Now there's this asshole. Black Lincoln Town Car, blocking access to the second pump and with his gas cap on the wrong side. White guy, mid-30s, hair slicked back, dressed like an undertaker, texting furiously on his touchscreen phone. Scandinavian Black Metal blares discordantly from his speakers...I think it might be *Mayhem*.

A generic red Cavalier pulls up on the other side. It's driven by a nondescript pudgy office drone clad in the industry standard, white poly-blend dress shirt. He frowns at the music, frowning deeper when I tell him we don't have a credit card machine or an ATM. He hands me a roll of quarters, whining that it is his laundry money. Fuck you, the laundry has an ATM and a change machine, and we need quarters. I pump his ten dollars and he

leaves. I turn back to the Black Metal undertaker, who has finished his text.

I get a clear look at him now, since he's staring directly at me. His skin seems unnaturally pale, nearly translucent, with a thin sheen of oil, eyes far too dark...a sharp stabbing pain strikes immediately behind my left eye, like a migraine, but I've never had one before.

I break eye contact as I circle around the pumps, and the pain subsides to a dull ache. Leaning against the trunk for support, steel sags beneath my weight as if it were gelatin, and I spasmodically jerk away out of fear that I might somehow be absorbed, amoeba-like, by this sinister black car, trapped and horribly digested in its trunk. I reassure myself it's only the drugs and everything will be fine as long as I stay cool. I look up and he's out of the car.

"You want gas?" I ask. Not necessarily a stupid question, as he has Nebraska plates and might only want directions or the key to the john. His entire body shifts to the side as he cocks his head, one arm jerking skywards as if pulled by an alcoholic puppeteer.

"*Yoo want gassss?*" he mimics, a shrill falsetto. The toothy grimace on his doughy face stretches obscenely, improbably, impossibly wide, all the way to his earlobes as his eyes fill with ink...then he snaps back to semi-normalcy for a moment...a Midwestern traveling salesman on the road for weeks, staying at fleabag motels and wearing a fresh off the rack suit from *JCPenney*. I blink and shake my head.

"If you want gas, your gas cap is on the wrong side. You'll need to turn it around." Suddenly, he's a mannequin with a fresh coat of flat white paint, smouldering black pits for eyes, and a wide maw crookedly filled with hundreds of thin needle teeth.

"*You're on the wrong side! Yoo need to turn it around!*" The shrieks actually seem gleeful. I'm tripping balls, and this guy is

THE OTRIDER

obviously out of his mind. No cameras, no panic button, here by myself. Overhead lights flicker and dim, or maybe that's a hallucination too...the angles of the gas pumps are all wrong, distorted, non-Euclidean. I cannot deal with this bullshit tonight. We close at 10, and it's nearly quarter of...I don't even need to throw him out, we may as well close right now.

"Dude...we're closed. The *Conoco* at Colfax and Colorado is only a mile away and they're open all night. You have a good day." Overhead lights are out for real...probably the breaker tripped again. The office lights remain on, providing a soft glow from the windows. The stereo fades in volume until it shuts off...I give the car a second glance, but no-one else is inside. Instantly, he's standing in front of me, and there's no way he could've moved that fast. He smells of almonds.

"*Come closer...*" I spring about five feet back and pull the gun, a pocket sized Jennings with a bumper chrome finish that flashes like a signal mirror.

"YOU KNOW WHAT *THIS* IS, MOTHERFUCKER?" I yell. He smiles that impossible Stretch Armstrong smile and slips something out of his sleeve...a sleek Italian stiletto that snaps open a 6" blade, making it over a foot long overall. I rack a round into the chamber and point it at his chest.

"YOU NEED TO GET YOUR CREEPY CLOWN ASS THE FUCK OUTTA MY GAS STATION *RIGHT NOW!*"

"*Ooooooooooooo...*" he mocks, lifting the knife over his head, twirling it playfully, slowly closing the distance even though his legs aren't moving, gliding over the asphalt as though his Oxfords are on casters. The slender blade is double edged, but from my experience with stilettos they tend to be only slightly sharper than the average tent stake...and he's holding it wrong.

C. R. JAHN

I'm on parole and ain't even supposed to be in the same room as a gun, so even though I'm clearly justified I decide not to shoot him dead. I fire a warning shot...into the top of his foot.

BRRAAPPP!!!

Six shell casings tinkle to the ground. One of the design flaws of the early J-22s is that if the breech face gets peened, or the sear spring weakens, or the firing pin channel gets gunked up, they have a tendency to slamfire and go full auto. Mine happens to have all of the aforementioned problems, so two and three round bursts happen fairly regular, but rarely a full mag dump.

So I'm now facing a knife wielding maniac with an empty gun...and from the look of things I even missed his foot. The slide doesn't lock back on these zinc nightmares, so I decide to bluff. I point it at his face.

"The next one is going right in your forehead." He frowns, lowering the knife. Metal suddenly blasts from his car again, startling both of us. I sprint to the office, locking the door behind me. When I turn around, I see the Town Car pulling onto 8th with no headlights.

My heart is pounding out of my chest and I feel like I'm about to puke. I roll the chair over to the window and sit down. I don't hear any sirens. We're far enough from the *ShotSpotter* sensors that they may not have been able to triangulate my position. I go to the breaker box. Sure enough, the breakers for the outside lights have tripped. I flip them back on and cut power to the pumps. I need to collect that brass before taking the readings...but first I need to stash the deuce-deuce up in the ceiling tiles in case the cops are on their way.

I only find four of the nickle plated casings and rush through the readings. I count out the till, make the drop, punch out, kill

THE OTRIDER

the lights, set the alarm, and lock the door behind me. I walk over to the bike and listen...nothing. I glance up Washington and down 8th...no Town Car anywhere to be seen. I kick the old Honda to life and go home.

* * *

I awaken disoriented and drained. I feel like I might be coming down with the flu. I have no recollection of any dreams at all. I recall getting in bed, closing my eyes, and lying there with my eyes closed for roughly ten minutes, *trying* to get to sleep, then opening them to glance at the clock and seeing daylight. The clock says 9:27. Eight hours have literally passed in the blink of an eye. That's never happened to me before. I am deeply disturbed by this, and still exhausted...I feel as if I haven't slept at all.

Luckily, I don't need to be at the gas station until three. I stagger into the kitchen and crack open a bottle of *Deep Rock* spring water, washing down a handful of *Echinacea* capsules and a multivitamin. I don't bother to walk to the bathroom...I just take a long piss in the empty sink, run the faucet, and stagger back to the mattress where I collapse. Everything goes black...

* * *

There is a little man standing in the room examining my paperbacks. Well, not a man, but a distinctly humanoid figure, less than two feet tall and bright yellow, with somewhat reptilian features. He notices I'm awake and staring at him. I'd left the Jennings at work, and the Charter Arms with one bullet is in the bucket across the room...I don't even have a bent throwing star handy.

“Why, hello! How are you today?” he exclaims. I don't quite know how to respond to that.

C. R. JAHN

“What’s up?”

“How marvelous! What an intelligent and perceptive individual you are! I have come to offer you a proposal.”

“And what might that be?”

“You are clearly a seeker of Truth. I can teach you a great many things. You shall be respected by all. I can even reveal how to clear your name so you may attain the success you so rightfully deserve.”

“Alright. But what do you expect from me in return?”

“Why, absolutely nothing! This shall be my gift to you...all you need do is agree to be my friend. Would you like to be my friend, Jacob?” A lifetime of social conditioning compels me to agree out of politeness, but the moment I open my mouth to speak, a black blur streaks across the room and slams into him.

The little man’s eyes bug out of his head, mouth gaping in a silent scream, as the giant Rottweiler chomps down on his torso, viciously shaking him like a stuffed doll. I now realize this devious creature was attempting to trick me into agreeing to a binding contract. I decide to let Otto use him as a chew toy for a while longer before finally barking the command, **“GIVE!”** compelling my dead dog to drop him to the floor.

He sits up, dazed. There is no blood, but indentations from Rottweiler fangs sank deep into his yellow flesh like punctures through Plasticine. I elect to go with the *Adirondack Hill Folk Rite of Banishment*, since it is quick, informal, and fits my mood:

“You need to get the fuck outta my house and don’t come back.” The air around him shimmers and he vanishes.

BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP! BRAP!

THE OTRIDER

It is 1:30. At least I got four good hours of sleep. I switch off the alarm and start the coffeemaker.

* * *

Fubucky is a gangly bucktoothed motherfucker with a scraggly goatee and tightly curled hair that hasn't been trimmed in months, giving him the appearance of a demented Poodle with mange. He rarely speaks...I think he's probably autistic or some shit...but he always shows up early, and his count is never off by more than a few bucks here and there, so he's unlikely to get fired anytime soon.

If the cops showed up to ask about gunshots I think he'd probably mention it, but he doesn't, so I assume I'm good to go. Besides, my little .22 doesn't make a lot of noise, and people in this neighborhood tend to mind their own business, because a single interaction with Denver's finest is usually more than enough for most, since they have a shittier attitude than practically any other department in the country, so the hipsters and yuppies are rightfully terrified of them.

I still worry, because a lot of them recently migrated from places like Illinois and Massachusetts for the legal weed, and calling 911 is practically a reflexive compulsion for Yankees. I spot the maroon Crown Vic pulling in and my heart stops for a couple of beats. I casually slide the old Manila Folder out of my pocket, tossing it in the office wastebasket, before walking outside.

The Crown Vic's windows are tinted far darker than the law allows, but the spotlight on the side shows it *is* the law. The window rolls down and I see my parole officer's bigfakesmile under his thick moustache. He makes a point of staring at my belt buckle: a standard open-faced garrison buckle, since the conditions of my parole specifically forbid me from wearing

buckles over 4 ounces due to the incident. I haven't weighed the buckle, since I assumed it was fine, and apparently he decides it's fine too.

He glances over at my bike. A small set of baffles is spot welded inside the straight pipes to make it street legal, and due to the non-association clause I'm not stupid enough to have slapped a support sticker on it. He turns back to me.

"Well, I see you're still gainfully employed, so I can check that box on my monthly report. Everything going well here? No problems?"

"This is a nice low stress job for me. I like talking to the customers and being outside." I think that was a good answer. He nods. It looks like he won't even be getting out of the car this time.

"Good, glad to hear that. It's been a year and you've been doing okay, so I think we can probably dispense with the monthly appointments. You just give me a call every month to check in and let me know if anything changes."

"Any particular day or time you want me to call?"

"Just once a month, but make sure you talk to me, personally. Don't just leave a message on voicemail."

"Alright." A lazy cop is a good cop. Besides, after the very first month he realized I wasn't one of the usual scumbags and took it easy on me, not subjecting me to the bullshit patdowns, surprise piss tests, and unannounced home visits that other guys had to deal with. While I know I can never trust him, or any cop, he seems decent enough...on our last appointment a squirrel climbed onto his windowsill, and I saw he'd left a few cashews there. The window rolls up and he drives away. He's never gotten gas here, probably because it's a city vehicle and we don't accept plastic.

THE OTRIDER

I walk back inside as Fubucky is leaving, eyes blank, plugged into his cheap *SanDisk* player. I have no idea what he listens to...Billy said he thought it was audiobooks of some sort. I retrieve *balisong* from the wastebasket and stand up on the desk to retrieve my Jennings and Sumatran from the ceiling.

I pull a ziplock bag and wadded latex glove from my boot, putting on the glove before carefully reloading the mag with 6 CCI Stingers, the only round that reliably cycles. I rack the slide, cocking the striker over an empty chamber so I'll only be pulling against one spring rather than two, and pop in the mag...that's the only safe way to carry one of these. I've heard too many stories of Saturday Night Specials going off in people's pockets to feel comfortable carrying it any other way, especially since these guns have a tendency to discharge if dropped.

Regardless, tucked behind my wallet it provides a sense of comfort, knowing that if some freak tries to kill me while I'm working alone, even though it may not be powerful enough to stop him, he ain't gonna get away clean. The Jennings is accurate enough to hit a paper plate within 10 feet, and those Stingers have enough pop to go through an inch thick pine board.

I still feel a bit off from that shit I smoked last night, but the coffee should help. I splurge and make a full pot.

* * *

It is another slow day. Shortly after the sun goes down, a hearse pulls up to the pumps. I blink and shake my head. Nope, not a hearse, but a battered Volvo 240DL wagon covered with black primer...probably about 10 rattle cans worth, as even the side windows in the back are primed. The flat primer sucks up the light, absorbing it, a rolling shadow.

C. R. JAHN

I walk up from behind, taking in the Texas plate and the old school Industrial stickers: *Skinny Puppy*, *NIN*, *Tool*. I approach the driver side and hear *Joy Division* playing at low volume.

The woman looks to be older than my mom. I blink twice and stare at her directly...the wrinkled face with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes is gone, replaced with that of a girl recently out of high school, maybe a college student. That Black Diamond shit is obviously still in my system. I note dyed black hair roughly snipped at collar length with a few facial piercings: “snakebites” double labret rings and a spiked horseshoe piercing the septum. Her brown eyes are flat like the primer.

“Twenty,” she says, and hands me two tens. The car barely takes eighteen dollars worth. I hand her back the change.

“Keep it. Where’s a place that sells good pizza around here?” I point down Washington Street.

“Go South two blocks. *Angelo’s* is my favorite. You can park in the lot for the barbeque place across the street. Whaddaya like on your pizza?”

“Thanks.” She doesn’t answer my question, doesn’t crack a smile, just looks straight ahead and drives off. I watch her taillights disappear before walking inside for another cup of coffee.

* * *

A half hour before closing, the Town Car returns. I rack a round into the Jennings before walking outside, tucking it in front of my wallet rather than behind it. I slowly approach from behind, hearing Classical music blaring rather than Metal...something by *Wagner*. Nebraska plates again, but the tag number is different. Not the same car.

The driver could be Creepy Clown’s brother: same style of suit, but the slicked back hair is dirty blond, his face a bit longer

THE OTRIDER

and more angular. I glare at him, saying nothing. I break out in a cold sweat, pins and needles all over my clammy skin, suddenly dizzy and weak. He turns shark eyes to me, grinning impossibly wide, cheeks stretching past his head a half foot on either side as black vapor rises from the shoulders of his cheap polyester suit.

“*What issss your doggie’ssss name?*” Everything blurs out of focus like I’m underwater and I feel this pressure like a 200 pound weight pressing down on me, a roaring in my head as dozens of voices shout words I don’t understand, and I know I’m about to pass out for sure. His door swings open.

Without even thinking about it, my arm snaps up and I shoot him in the face, three or four times, almost like someone else is pulling the trigger. The bullets’ impact makes doughy flesh ripple and open, but nothing splashes, spills, or even drips. It doesn’t seem to faze him a bit as he steps out of the car and faces me, grinning, arms wide, coming closer, ever closer, gliding across the asphalt, gliding *over* it. I put the last two in his throat, and that stops him in his tracks. He raises a hand to his neck and coughs, hacks, gags, finally spitting out a misshapen grey and copper mass that I realize is an expanded Stinger hollowpoint.

I drop the Jennings, flipping *balisong* as I close the distance, burying it up under the sternum as I slam my weight into him, riding him to the ground, jerking the brass double handle around like I’m shifting gears on a sports car. I yank the blade free as I roll to the side, springing to my feet. He doesn’t move. I look down at my knife and see there’s no blood...it’s only damp, as if I’d run it under water to clean it, oily droplets beading.

I wipe both sides on my faded black Levis before flipping it closed, sliding it back in my front pocket. I quickly glance up and down the street, seeing no witnesses staring in slackjawed horror, before bending down to snatch up the Jennings and sprinting into

the office. I flip the breakers for the pumps and overhead lights. We're closing early again.

I'm overwhelmed with dozens of thoughts zipping through my mind. I need to lose these weapons, but it can wait until later, they'll go up in the ceiling for now. I need to get that body in the trunk of the Town Car before ditching it somewhere, but I can't leave prints or fibers...maybe I should burn it? I grab a fresh set of latex gloves from the cleaning closet, pulling them on before turning to switch off the neon OPEN sign in the window. The car is gone.

I rush outside, running to the pumps. There's no sign of the car or any trace of the body. One of the local goblins might've jumped in a nice car left running at a gas station and jetted, as that happens from time to time along Colfax, but they wouldn't have touched the body. Hell, if they even noticed a body they would've ran away, not wanting to risk catching any heat. Some of these dirtbags would even dime me to the *Crime Stoppers* hotline, hoping to cash in on a reward. Report a homicide that results in an indictment, you're guaranteed at least a grand if you promise to testify, and a thousand bucks will make the party last all week long. Next to insurance settlements for walking into slow moving traffic, *Crime Stoppers* tips are a solid source of revenue for crackheads and cart pushers.

No, this guy that I repeatedly shot in the face and churned a tunnel through his heart apparently got up, brushed himself off, and drove away, not even leaving a single drop of blood behind. This is bullshit. This did *not* happen. Those weird drugs have damaged my brain. Then I see the shell casings.

This is really bad. Hallucination or not, I just emptied my gun at the same location, same time, two nights in a row. Hopefully, everyone assumed the rapid series of loud pops was some asshole setting off a string of illegal firecrackers.

THE OTRIDER

Maybe I hallucinated the guy from last night too? This is really bad. I'm clearly going insane, having some sort of chemically induced psychotic break, and it's getting worse. I can't trust myself anymore. I need to drop this gun down a sewer grate before I seriously hurt someone and go back to prison. I am losing my mind.

Eventually, I calm down. I close up as usual and ride home.

* * *

I'm 10 years old, in my Cub Scout uniform, back on the hayride. Well, it was *supposed* to be a Halloween hayride, but there was no hay, just a big flatbed trailer pulled behind an old tractor, loaded up with about thirty kids from three different Scout troops, all arguing and picking on one another as the tractor drove up the hill, into the fields, into the dark...

I still don't understand what happened that night. I was hanging over the railing, looking at the ground, wondering what that green light was, shining on the dirt, keeping pace with the trailer. There were lights back there, but they were red and dim. This was like a focused beam.

Look up, the voice in my ear said. I look up and see a green light in the cloudless sky, a shimmering green oval hovering motionless and silent far above us. I ask my friends Joey and Mike if they see it, and they do. Unexpectedly, it blinks out of sight, instantly reappearing in another part of the sky not far away, then it does it again, again, again...I realize it's doing this for my benefit, trying to convey something to me, a combination of advanced concepts incomprehensible to my conscious mind being downloaded directly into my wetware.

This light is intelligent, this light is communicating with me telepathically, this light is somehow teleporting or passing

C. R. JAHN

through dimensions, and perhaps most importantly, this light is shining a beam right on me!

I take my eyes off it for a moment to look around, and it's as if time is frozen. Joey and Mike gape wordlessly upwards, and the other thirty Scouts don't even notice it, continuing to slap and pinch each other like stupid monkeys, but everything has gone dead silent, or perhaps I've gone deaf...I can't even hear the tractor's loud unmuffled motor anymore.

I look up again, continuing to watch the light zip about, dancing, for what seems like at least fifteen minutes, until I get tired of watching it...so very tired...then it's gone. It didn't shoot across the sky or do anything dramatic, it didn't even wink out, I guess I probably took my eyes off it right before it disappeared, so I never saw it depart.

I have a vague recollection of yelling at the light, yelling the word, "**LAND!**" over and over, hoping it would drop down to Earth and make formal contact like in the movies. Actually, that's the last thing I recall before it vanished.

I feel dazed. Looking around, the other Scouts were leaning all over one another, as if awakening from a drugged stupor, confused, disoriented. I look to the farmer, and he's sagged over the steering wheel as if passed out, but the tractor is still moving slowly forward and he straightens, shakes his head, and continues driving.

Everyone is quiet as we ride back to the parking lot. Something powerful, meaningful, and deeply Significant has just occurred, although I have absolutely no idea what it entailed. It's like my memory has been wiped clean. I smell their fear, feel their panicked energy, and realize everyone else has determined something had gone terribly wrong.

The tractor stops in the parking area and is mobbed by parents. They shout angrily at the farmer. What happened? Did

THE OTRIDER

the tractor break down? They were worried! Why is he over an hour late? Is he drunk? The farmer is an old man and practically in tears. “*I don’t know,*” he chants over and over, like a mantra.

“Mom, I feel sick,” one of the Scouts from another troop says. A lot of them are sick. Someone says it must be carbon monoxide poisoning from the exhaust. Someone else says they’ll sue.

I ride home in the back of the car, a metallic blue Chrysler Imperial. My Da is furious. He hates being kept waiting, and was not allowed to drink his beer at a Scout function. He is in a hurry to get home. He blames me. “What happened?” my Ma squawks, “Why were you so late?” I tell her I don’t know. I don’t mention the light. I’m physically and mentally exhausted. I fall asleep on the way home.

* * *

I wake up gradually, painfully, stiff as if I’d slept wrong. I twist to the side and feel several vertebrae pop, which offers some relief.

I pick up the Bulldog, recently cleaned, oiled, and fully loaded with five fat .44 Special hollowpoints, stowing it out of sight beneath the worn mattress.

The alarm hasn’t sounded yet so I switch it off. I turn on the coffeemaker and trudge over to the shower.

* * *

I have the day off, but swing by *Max’s* because I know Billy is working. I kill the engine, rolling the bike over and leaning it against the wall. He’s pumping gas for a customer so I walk into the office while he’s busy and get the Jennings from the ceiling. He walks in as I’m coming out.



Jake used to be someone once, before the incident that sent him to prison. Now he's back, his existence split between a mysterious spiritual quest within the dreamlands, and the tedium of pumping gas for minimum wage...until the Smilers showed up. This tale goes beyond dark urban fantasy into the realm of occult noir. C. R. Jahn is a bold new voice exploring uncharted territory with this nightmarish depiction of supernatural terror.

THE OUTSIDER

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