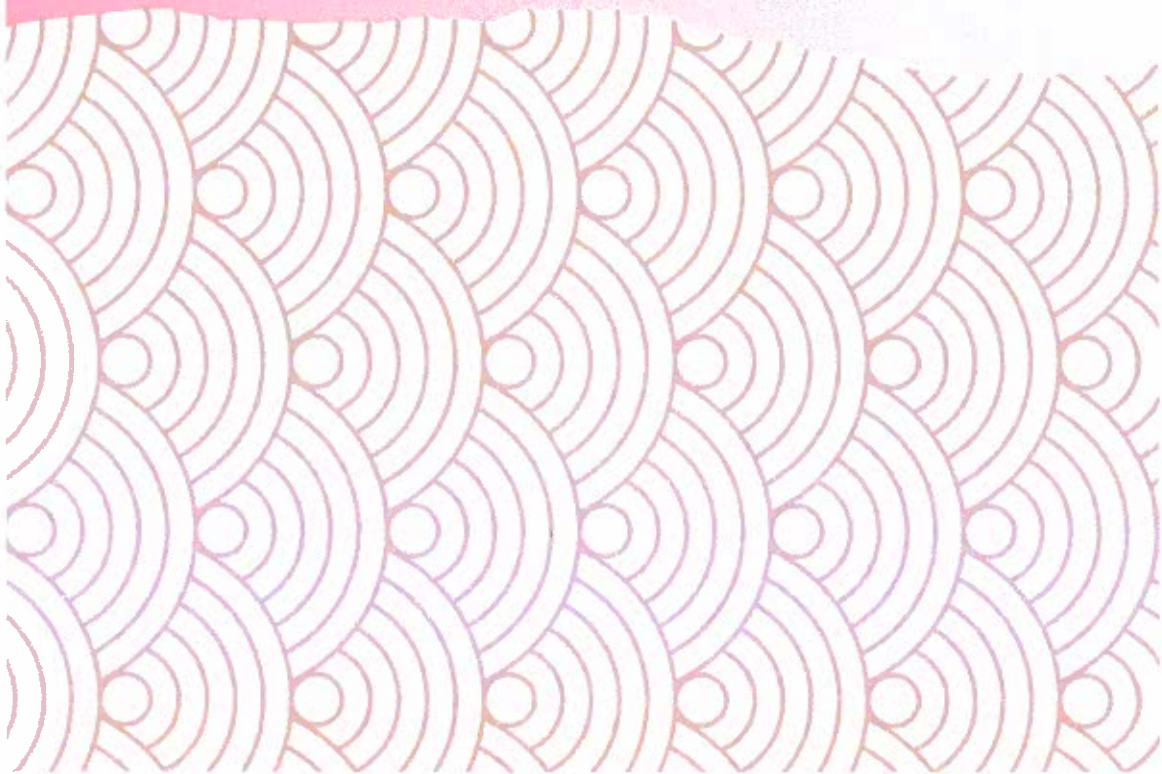




Gamble in the Woods



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This slow winter storm's followin' me out a this deep Maine pine forest and down I-95. Bet it's goin' a hang on right through Hampshire and Mass. Clear down to Foxwoods, with my luck. But that'll change. It's got to. See. I left 'em a note sayin' I was finally goin' a fix things. Yup. Get us started again on the right foot. That's what I told 'em. That's all they know. That, of course, and that they're still hungry. And cold.

i

The old '72 Bonneville sways even more on the highway than I remember. The wind is almost deafenin'. The single digit cold is rushin' in the damn window that doesn't quite close at the top. It don't really matter, much. There's no radio I'm tryin' to hear anyway. It's broke. Maybe it's a good thing. 'Least now the fumes from the broken exhaust pipe have a place to leak out. I can make this ride without gassin' myself. Or passin' out and crashin' into a tree. Wouldn't that beat all? I finally take steps to set things right and I wind up gettin' myself killed. Terrific!

The old boat holds it own on these curves. Lots a weight pullin' it around corners. Right now I can hardly see, between the swirlin' snow and this busted defroster. I have to keep wipin' the inside a the windshield with what I hoped would be my extra shirt. No wonder, though; sign says Worcester. Gets elevated in these parts. Colder. Windier. More snow. I should drop out a this in a few more miles. When I break into Connecticut it should clear a bit.

I think I'll use this Mobil here to get some gas into the Bonnie and some out a me. She could probably use a quart a oil or two. Should have a mirror in the gents that I can freshen up in. Don't want to get to the biggest casino in the world lookin' like I just drove eight hours, even though that's what I'll have done in an hour when I get there.

The snow swirlin' across the highway back up in Worcester made it almost impossible to see. But here in Connecticut it's just deep and cold. Not as much wind howlin' either. I know 'cause that open window in the back's been quiet the past half hour. Just the swoshin' a the snow under the tires. That and . . . *kee-rist almightee* . . . Now if that wasn't enough to break me out a the highway doze I was coastin' along in. I didn't see him at first. Just heard the deep throat growl a the engine and shakin' a the chains comin' around this turn just below Danielson, where the road feeds in from Providence—"suicide six" they call it. A huge wave a blindin' whiteness is all I saw comin' at me from the left. Bet those plow guys don't even see me in their rear views now, even though they almost killed me.

Back when we lived where streets were plowed when it snowed, I'd get my dander up when I'd cleared the mouth a the driveway and the plows'd force-feed 'em full again.

But that's nothin' 'pared to the drift these two orange monsters just dumped on my hood. Blades can hardly keep up with it. Too cold to get out now. 'Sides, I'd get killed if I tried to stop. Storm and plows put an end to any shoulder to cry on hours ago.

Whew! Even with the snow around, the place still jumps out at me crestin' up this hill on Connecticut 2 below Norwich. Just as clear teal blue as it is in their casino brochure and TV ads. With any luck, Foxwoods will free me and mine up. Just as it did those Mashantuckets.

Remote parking. That valet attendant certainly was not kiddin'. I'm in the freakin' woods, for God's sake. Can't even see the place from here. No wonder the bus comin' is called a shuttle. Bet there'll be astronauts on the next one comin' through. Not goin' a drag this coat through the place; I'll die a the heat. Here you go, coat, keep my seat warm when the cold blows in this stuck window.

Thanks for gettin' me here, Bonnie. If I have my way, we'll drive back slower. And I'll treat you to your own place in the barn back home. I'll fix you up to show you off at some town parades. Maybe even get your picture in the *Sentinel*. Life'll be easier for you and us. Got to go. NASA's callin'.

ii

Remember now, friend, none a the old habits can come out. Wouldn't do for 'em to recall "the teach." Watch for familiar faces. Never can tell if a pit boss from the Beach or the Strip came up or over for a job here in the Woods. 'Course, they'd have to be real good. Sported fifty more pounds then. Why not? I could eat. Drank, too. Now my only addiction is caffeine, and I didn't drink coffee back then. And I hope I leave with only just that one.

This place is cut out a rocks and trees. Nice piece a work. Not that anyone comes to look at the landscape.

Waterfalls right here indoors. Well, ain't that a nice touch. For sure, that'll stop on the casino floor. It'll be the same as all the others. No windows to see if it's night or day. No clocks to know the time. Disorientation. That's essential. If I don't know where I am when I'm there, I won't know what I'm losin'. Disconnect me from me. Then disconnect me from my money. Drink and eat. Make myself to house . . . 'cause it isn't home.

So, Arthur, the rules a the day are these: Some eats. No drinks. No gettin' caught countin' cards. No lookin' at the cameras like that confused, guilty wolf in our hen yard, after we'd eaten the hens for our last meal. And don't get greedy. Just take what you need. And make sure to lose a few sets, just to make it look like real luck.

iii

Neat costumes on the cage workers. Color-coded to the chips, too. Class joint. Need to be careful here. They're probably good at watchin'. And it's been quite a long time between decks for "the teach." Bones healed faster than my memory a the last time. Like two lifetimes ago. Shake that memory like dice right now. Clear head and clean heart to prevail, like I had to tell 'em at AA.

Fight the momentum a the place, Art. Okay. I'm okay. I did it right. I bought only a few chips first. Now I go to some other games, first. Like I need to feel my way. Lose some. Get ahead a bit. Buy more chips. Settle in. Then watch the old hen house door.

I never liked the wheel. Too many ways to lose. Not enough to win. Besides, the ball's fickle. There are only so many cards to lay from a boot, even a five-deck stack. This darn ball can roll anywhere. The last time doesn't limit the next fall. Lost enough here. Time to move on.

Don't you lean over any further to throw those dice, sweetheart. Your dress'll be just a memory. It'll be what's inside and about to fall out a it that the guys around this table will remember. A course, if you're lookin' for a sugardaddy, there's plenty a tongues hangin' out at this end of the board.

Couldn't stand the noise around craps, either. Time for some quiet play.

An hour? Okay, thanks. I never heard a waitin' an hour for a seat at a poker game. And I thought their brochure was full a it. But, by God, there *are* that many tables here. And more over in the non-smokin'. Five card. Seven card. Since Chinatown I haven't seen this many Asians out a soldering uniform in one place. But I bet a bunch of 'em are packin' to protect their belongings. I can just imagine 'em clashin' out in the parkin' lot: "I'll see your .38 and raise you a .45 automatic."

I've waited long enough. Time to go see Jack and the other twenty. Tables with different wagers to start. It's like fallin' off a bike. I remember. Low limit tables first, just to break the ice. Watch the dealers, in case they switch off to a steeper table later. And watch the players at the higher tables. Be ready and be there when it's time to step aboard.

The cowboy at the \$ 50 table. He's an odd one. He folds too much. But he wins big when he stays. I can hide behind his action if they're watchin' him. *Yes, thanks, I'll have a black coffee. But I'll be over at the higher stakes tables when you come back.*

Time to go, Art. Be steady. *'Night. Thanks.* So, it wasn't a great tip. I'm not supposed to be flashy. *'Sides.* You won't look to play me again. And you won't hardly remember me either if they come askin' who broke the bank. You'll never figure on the wolf in the lamb's clothin' with a cowboy in town.

iv

Here comes the coffee. Great. That's worth a distraction they'll think I didn't mean to create. *Wonderful. Thank you. Here's for you.* That's it, Cowboy, take one of 'em drinks she's totin'. Nice eyes, pardner. Now I know who you're playin' with. Drink up. Both a you. You'll need 'em when I'm through with you.

Okay, lady. You get up and when leave when the dealer changes and they start a fresh boot. Then I can sit down right between those two and figure out their play.

Here comes the relief. You better get goin', Miss. Elsewise you'll be wearin' the last a this coffee on the back a that pretty sequined gown. A shame. You'll have to go up to your room to change.

Beautiful. Like a script in summer stock Down East. Dealer exits upstage. New dealer enters downstage left. Pretty lady in sequined gown exits stage right. And Art from Maine enters downstage right, sits center stage. How did that white-haired guy on TV used to say it? "I love when a plan comes together." Now what were the chances a that really happenin'? I used to be able to figure that out when I taught probability to seniors. Too long ago. Four lifetimes.

Nothing inspires the confidence of a blackjack dealer when comin' to a new group a players than this—breakin' open a new deck. She was taught not to look at the cards. Just break 'em in. Shuffle 'em. Cut 'em. Gesture to let a player cut 'em. Boot 'em up and deal.

Nice. Already I know you're left-handed, dear. So the next player down the line sees his card before the mark. Just a split second more. But that's all I need. If Fat Boy on my right is runnin' the deck for the Cowboy on my left, that puts me in the middle. I see his

card before he does. I can take in his expression or the Cowboy's; 'cause I'll know which to watch first.

The suit down left a Cowboy is tryin' too hard to impress the woman dealer. And she hasn't even laid a card. Let alone him. The fool doesn't know she'll stick to cards and smile him into the poorhouse every time he asks her to hit him. Jerk. Good. He'll waste time and make the Fat Boy and the Cowboy impatient. And don't I know that impatient players make mistakes. Oh, yes. I can feel it in my bones. And pairs of impatient players are too overt.

Let's see. It's been quite a while. I've gone down five hundred. Now I'm up two thousand. Time to lose a big one and ask for more chips. Then the fun begins.

Thanks, I'll try to take better care a these. I ought a not mind her smirk. She's got kids at home she tryin' to feed, too, I bet. Hope she's doin' better at it than I am. But Fat Boy and Cowboy. That's different. They're goin' to pay for their snide faces.

A six up and a five down. I can take a lady and live quite well. Cowboy's got the other five up. He's been playin' confident with five or lower down. So, he can take her majesty as well. But I'll still take him to the party and leave him at the door.

Fat Boy will overload with a fourth card unless it's under a four. And a four's no good for Cowboy. Show time. Let's make this work. I win. They lose. See how well they take it.

Yup, there's Fat Boy's seven. He's tanked. Took one for the Cowboy, he did. Make sure you don't laugh now. Oh, what do you know, it wasn't a lady. It was her knockabout knave, instead. Twenty-one for me, honey. And there's a six for the Cowboy. Too low, he's gone. And the suit down left eats a queen and goes over by one.

That was a harsh glance. Fat Boy's smartin' a bit now. And I'm back up a grand. Now let's see if Fat Boy gets cute. He'll leave me the low cards and the high ones for the Cowboy next time the cards are layin' that way.

And here we are. Just two deals later. Fresh for the kill. Fat Boy folds. Me, too. Cowboy takes the trey. Not happy. Goes again. A nine. Too big. You lose, pardner. And the suit grabs a four and a three and comes home at twenty. Two low cards that Cowboy would have wanted on the next draw. Gone now. And he lost six hundred. Is that a little perspiration I see on Fat Boy's brow? Who says you only play against the house in this game? Two more sets like this in the next half hour and these guys'll get riled. Better start puttin' up here in case they bail and quit.

Now it's gettin' interestin'. This girl's losin' too much. Fat Boy's settlin' in again. Hell, I've given him ten minutes without stingin' him. He has one short memory. And Cowboy.

He's still fumin'. I can feel it. But the last quarter hour's cooled his temper. Fifteen hundred won seems enough to quench his fire. But not his thirst. A hundred-dollar chip for a free drink. Aren't we feelin' our oats there, pard! *Just a coffee, thanks. Black.* Go ahead and laugh in your gin there, Fat Boy. Oh, and have another, so you think you're not seein' straight when I get you and your buddy here twice in a row. Ready?

Lots a high cards out a that five-deck boot. Just a third left of it. Less than ten a the sixty royal family left. But less than half the aces have seen the light a the suit's cigar. Kee-rist that thing stinks. A little diversion here for the Cowboy. Here I go.

That's it. Fan the smoke back his way. And he thinks I'm fixin' to hit him with somethin'. What a nervous pup. But what cold eyes.

The dealer. She stops in mid-deal. The pit boss, already watchin' Cowboy's fifteen and my five grand go out a the house in fifteen minutes, moves in. Suit knocks the ash off the end a the stick and smashes it in the ashtray. Looks up sort a complainin', but mostly apologizin'.

Startin' up the deal again, she turns my first card, instead a leavin' it down. Now she stops again. *Leave it go, I'm partial to sevens. Just bury my next one. Okay with y'all? Who's goin' gripe? It's my card what's ruined.*

But Fat Boy knows he wants to bitch about it. Now I get a low card under, where he can't figure what's happenin' to Cowboy next. 'Cause he knows the boot's half overloaded with the under-six cards his boss likes. Yeah, it's clear. Cowboy's the boss. But I have to give it to the fay guy. He's good when it's just the two of 'em. He's just not used to someone sittin' 'tween 'em and givin' 'em a screwin'.

Well, bookends. The suit wants it from the dealer and Fat Boy's getting' it from me, instead.

To show her I'm a good sport, I'm layin' the money out there. Chip stacks worth three big ones. Everything I took in the last fifteen minutes. Dealer smiles. Thinkin' she's relieved I didn't make a big deal to the pit boss about that seven. In about eight minutes, she'll wish I had.

Fat Boy makes his play. Soaks the boot of one a the tens still left. Leaves low cards for the Cowboy. 'Course, none of 'em know this delightful young lady has put an ace down under my seven. Now, with eighteen, I can win. But that leaves all the low cards for Cowboy. So, I move a stack a fifteen out with my start-up three. I ask for a card. Delightful, again. A three. Now I have twenty-one, if I please.

But three things.

First, I don't want Cowboy gettin' the next two low cards.

Then, I need to make sure Cowboy's hasslin' Fat Boy after I win with the five card Charlie I'm workin' on.

And, last, I've got to beat the house with a Charlie to win double up.

Then, I close for the day and go back to Maine to set things straight.

So, I push another fifteen stack out there and ask for another card, knowin' I can take a ten and still win. But I sense it won't be a ten. Not quite yet, anyway. How much do I feel that? Enough to bet six thousand dollars on it. And that's a lot for this transplanted boy, with a mortgaged farm in Maine, who doesn't talk anything like 'em up there.

How nice, a four. And wow. Fat Bot is actually squirmin' in his chair. And he just snagged that second gin as it went by like a papoose on a travois. And he didn't spill a drop. My hero. I'll just move this last stack a fifteen out there with the rest and see what happens.

Now I've got the pit boss' attention real good. And the suit's kind a amazed. He's seein' all this from the outside. Not Cowboy, though. He knows these cards'd be his if I wasn't sittin' here. Plus. I'm drainin' his well dry a low cards. Poor girl with the boot. She's a wreck. She knows her night's over after this deal. Her wedding-ringed finger rests on the next booted card. Waitin' on me.

Can't imagine her grilling later about the face-down ace after the wrong-up seven. They'll be into the surveillance footage to see if she's part a this. Well, mistakes happen. Sorry, kid. Really.

But I can't get sidetracked thinkin' a that. 'Cause here's where I'm to do, or die. Years ago, "the teach" would have scrounged for more money to play on the last card. Greed would give it away. But I've learned. I slide my last stack a fifteen out there. I can go as high as a six. But I'm bettin' on no more than a five. There are still over sixty cards, a the seventy left in the boot, that fit that bill. Fat Boy knows it, too. He's slowly shakin' his head. That's goin' get him a lot a surveillance camera study time later. But he hasn't been caught yet. He doesn't know what I've learned first-hand. And arms. And ribs. And legs.

I smooth the felt in front a me with the back a my hand and show I have no more chips. With the other hand, my free hand, I ask for the fifth card. A deuce. How sweet.

My hand's shakin' a little when I turn the ace up and over. The pit boss steps closer to the dealer and makes sure the chip count is right. He moves the tripled winnings into one large series a stacks that looks to me like Lefrak City back in Queens, New York, where I started hustlin' after school. More lifetimes ago.

Cowboy now does the unthinkable. He reaches across to spread my cards to see 'em better. I'm not movin' a muscle. But the pit boss points to his hand and curtly calls him "sir." That stops Cowboy's hand. But it also makes everyone wrapped up in the glamor a the Charlie come to the same realization that fills his ten-gallon brain. Not once. But twice. I had twenty-one—twice—during the hand and kept playin'.

The pit boss knows that the house policy a payin' double on a five card Charlie seduces fourteen out a fifteen players up over the top. And the bets are big when those fourteen lose. More than enough to cover one guy like me who makes the grade.

He knows also to look for card counters. He'd been watchin' Fat Boy and Cowboy for some time. My next move after Cowboy and the suit are done will tell him my tale.

Cowboy has no genital fortitude in the light a my Charlie. He folds and loses a few hundred in the deal. The suit takes three cards, tryin' to match my feat, while actually outchippin' my bet. He is one a the fourteen, though, and ends up with twenty-six. The inevitable eight hidin' for so long in the boot kicks him in the teeth. For some reason. Cowboy turns his cards to me. He shows me he would a made twenty without the last eight the suit took. Would a beat the dealer's seventeen.

All the cards and chips, except mine, are drawn back to the dealer's side a the table. I look at the pit boss. He expects it. *I would like to cash out, please, sir.*

He helps me with the table amenities and is thankin' me for playin' at Foxwoods. He isn't askin' me to come back and play any time soon though. He watches my chip tip to the dealer, carefully. Nothing more or nothing less than expected. Her smile is very nervous.

v

It doesn't take as long as I thought it might for these folks to convert my winnings to cash and fill out the papers for the IRS. I'm on the shuttle in less than a half hour from the time I left the table. With the bundle to show for it tucked in the waist belt they sold me.

I can't wait to see their faces. But I told the Bonnie I would ride her home less hard than in gettin' here. The snow's blowin' down here now. Must have come down over the evening and into the night. Worcester was about this bad. I hope I can see my car when this shuttle stops out at the remote lot.

Shuttle's off to Buffalo.

Gee's! Such a hurry. Almost ran me down. How fast do you have to go?

I'm down on the right. These cars are buried in snow. Good thing I counted the . . .

Hey, watch out man.

Damn. Got a fix this trunk lid. There should be a brush in here to clear the doors. Just enough light from those poles to see. I need that coat. Bad.

Ow! Right on the head. What the ... twice it hits me.

Come on.

vi

I can't believe my eyes. It wasn't the trunk lid blowin' in the wind that hit me.

It's Fat Boy and Cowboy. I ask what I can do for these guys and out comes Fat Boy's knife to slash my forearm and Cowboy's gun to keep me quiet.

For starters they want my money. Say it's theirs by rights. I ought to know better'n to break up another guy's play. What ever happened to honor among thieves, Fat Boy taunts. To which the Cowboy tells him to shut his trap. And then, he pistol whips the side a my face and I fall in the snow. He kicks me with these steel tipped boots with the thinnest

toe I've ever seen. Though I'm only seein' out a one eye. The other's already swelled shut. He's roughly into my shirt, rippin' the buttons, and grabbin' my winnings.

He tells Fat Boy to drive and picks me up and throws me at the same time. I land in the back seat a their car. Should a known. It's the car that almost ran me down. Must a followed me on the shuttle. Sure had time enough to get their car while I cashed in my chips. Guess it did take longer than I could afford. And they must a held onto theirs. Now he's in my pants pockets. Not molestin' me or nothin'. He's fetchin' my car keys out a my jeans. I lift my head to talk to him better and he whacks me on the ear with the gun butt. The car's bouncin' out onto the road. What with the snow and all. Cowboy's urg'in' him on, but Fat Boy acts like he wants directions to a tour or somethin'. I misjudged these guys as card cheats only. This isn't goin' to end well.

After what seems a few miles, they pull off the road. Cowboy pushes me out a the car, roughly again. He gives me such a kick in the rump with those damn boots. He hits me in the tenders from underneath and behind since I'm on all fours when I hit the snow. I almost black out from the shock. The small a my back crunches in pain. I hear bones snappin'. I'm sick, I remember that sound from last time. A lifetime ago.

He must be hittin' me with the gun butt again. Or somethin' else he's gotten from their car. Not only is he the boss at cards, he deals out the hurt without regard or askin' Fat Boy. I can't even grunt. My mouth's full a snow from him pressin' the back a my head into it.

But my ears. Oh yeah, they're open. And I hear 'em arguin'. Fat Boy's a real whiner. But since he's beggin' for me not to be killed on the spot, I'm prone to favorin' his feelings on the matter. Somethin's coverin' my head now, I can feel it. 'Course I can't see what it is in the black a the night. Was two in the morning when I cashed in my chips. Must be almost three by now.

A thought sends a real chill down my spine right about now. More pressure on my head. Kee-rist, what a noise! Hell, it was a gun shot. And my whole head's warm of a sudden on the right side. Artie, my boy, don't so much as move a muscle. If you're lucky and they're stupid, they'll be leavin' right now, 'cause they probably hear the same snow plow growlin' back on the road as I do. Lay still. You might stay alive. For now. Good job, Fat Boy. Whine some more. And get the both a you the hell out a here.

I'm not feelin' so good. I'm blackin' out ...

vii

They must a gone. Oh, what a headache.

I got a get up. I'll freeze to death lyin' here. Livin' in Maine these years taught me that. Huntin' was somethin' I hated. Just a rung above starvin'. Got a get inside somewhere.

There's somethin' to that "head wounds bleed bad" idea. Got to sit a minute and put my head between my knees. Awful faint. Looks like the cold stopped my arm bleedin'. But this head furrows a leaker. Can tell it even in the slight moonlight, reddenin' the snow. I need to get up or I be a popsicle instead a just a dad.

If that's not a light over there, it's the end a that tunnel to walk into when you're dyin' I seen with the kids on TV. One way or the other, I better get shakin' 'cause I ain't anywhere near bakin' out here.

No wonder they left the lights on. Snow's drifted at least four feet up the door a this PARK OFFICE. Just what I wanted to do tonight was climb a snowbank. Wooo. Blackin' ag . . .

Got to stop blackin' out like this. I'm near on to frozen. I must a looked like a body surfer at the beach when I leaned against that door and it let go. Slid right on top a the collapsing snowbank and smacked my head on this tile floor. Looks like a bathroom. Smells like it, too.

Mirror, mirror on the wall. I'm not the prettiest of 'em all. 'Pared to this mug, Omar Sherif looked good in Dr. Zhivago after walkin' through Siberia, or wherever the hell in Russia he traipsed. And I don't get Julie Christie either. If I get home, I'll rent that video and watch it with the kids in front of a fire. If I can get my money back, that is. *Bastards!!* Feels good to scream. Even if no one hears it. Gets the blood flowin'. As if I needed help in that area. Let's take stock here.

If the electric's on, and this hand dryer works . . . Oh, what a sweet sound. Here you go, hands. Get a little warm. Five or six blasts a this ought to calm the shakin' down. Go figure. I don't need a sign on the wall to tell me to shake the water free from my hands. Keep the heat off that arm wound there, Artie. Don't want two places bleedin' at once. What else they got around here? A much bigger room than just this corner toilet. Divider stall used to be here is gone now. Just empty brackets still bolted in the stone wall.

Not quite a Comfort Inn. But it'll do for now. Wish I could get that outer door shut, but the collapsed drift snow'll keep it open for sure. Stop your bitchin', Artie. You sound like Fat Boy, that paunchy whiner. Ironic, an ex-alkie owing his life to a little whine.

Door won't need that cinderblock to keep it open with all that snow. But it might work to get this closet over here open if it's locked—when my fingers are loosened up enough to turn the knob. Two more blasts a this hand dryer and I should be good to go. It's cold in here, but I'm out a that howling wind at least. And up off a that snow.

viii

Yup. Closet's locked. Well, more than one warehouse door in Queens gave way to my cinderblock guillotine "master key." Three times a charm. Good thing. Cold weather's no good for this crumblin' stone, either. Let's see. Should be a wall switch in here. Bingo. Bad choice a words, Artie.

First aid supplies. That's nice and considerate a the Parks and Recreation Department. I hope the stuff's big enough to go around my head. And aspirin, too. I seem to be on a roll here.

Lookin' good now, Artie, even backwards in the mirror. This red stuff's goin' a sting. Keep it out a the eye. I've never seen powder burns right through a guy's skin before. Cowboy, am I glad you flinched in the right direction.

Whoa! Did I say sting? Kee-rist, that burns. Between this stuff and the cold, this shouldn't get infected before I can get home.

Let's check out the rest a the supplies, Artie. What do you say? Things are definitely lookin' up.

A chest freezer? I can only hope. Yup, it is. "For Boy Scouts Cook-Outs Only." Well, I don't think there's a barbeque tonight. With any luck they camp in the winter like our troops did. Well. Imagine that, the power's on. And what have we here but ten packs of wieners. Good until June 1997. Another couple months yet. Terrific. And the old joke about only eight rolls. Well, there's no rolls, in any amount.

And, a course, no good scout troop stocks up food without at least one fall-back kerosene camp stove to go with it. Now to find some white fuel and I'll fill this inside flush in no time.

ix

Still a little frozen in the center. These would be better with rolls. No use cryin'.

Hello?

Thought for sure I heard something.

Who's there?

Maybe someone saw my blood trail in the snow. But who's out at four in the morning?

Good God. It can't be.

Be a good boy, now.

As long as he keeps his tail down and his fangs covered, this should be okay. Who am I kiddin'? I'm lookin' up into the eyes of a grey wolf. What can be okay about that? He isn't full grown, though. Suddenly I don't feel so good. Was either those old franks or this . . .

Aggh.

I can't believe, on top of all this, I go and puke.

Where are you goin' fella? Please don't come in here. It's too slippery down that bank. *Oh. God.*

This is too much. He's eatin' it. Better my lost dinner than me. He's as much of a mess as I am. Why are you lookin' at me like that, friend? Here, have the rest a these. That's it, Artie. Slide the rest of 'em dogs over there carefully. Don't startle the thing.

Take 'em. They're all yours.

Good boy. Hey, slow down, fella. Didn't your mama ever tell you not to wolf down your food?

Now where are you goin'? Into the stall space. Great. Stay in the corner why don't you? Just leave me a way out. Asleep?

Hey there.

I know your cousins up north, you know. They fed on most a our hens. For free. Ask 'em while you're sleepin'. Ask 'em about Artie and his kids and his wife way up there in Maine. We've been good to 'em.

I read all about their habits in the local library. Made sure we didn't shoot 'em on our property. Didn't let the others hunt your cousins either on our land. Let 'em stay with their packs. And that's my question. Where's yours? Are you a lone wolf? I didn't hear no howlin'; 'cept for the wind. You're pretty young to be a loner.

Thought I was your dad fixin' supper before, huh? Well, okay. For now, anyway. For as long as it takes for me to get out a here.

I'll be goin' now. Oh, don't growl at me that way.

Hey, where are you goin'? Don't lay in front a that door that way. I can't get out then. Come on. Fantastic. Why are you goin' to sleep, now; and there?

You been runnin' a lot tonight? That's what I read, you know. You run a lot. Then you sleep a lot. Might as well look around in the back and see if there's anything to be done about this. Stay sleepin', will you?

Where's a good hatchet or a knife when you need one? Like searchin' for tools in the barn at home after my kids do a project. None in sight. Great going, scouters. You fail the trail test. All you left me was this topo map. Whoa. What's this red line? Oh, boys, you have been good. Sorry for the hasty grade. You each get an extra orienteering merit badge.

Here we are at Blonder Park. And here's your trail to Foxwoods. Nice going, boys. Let's study this baby. Young brother wolf seems to have forced recess inside tonight. So, let's cuddle over there a bit at the faithful old hand-warmer and study this map path some.

I can take these two roads and skirt the lake and the steeper hills, including this one, Lantern Hill. Then it's a cross-country jaunt down this unfinished road and through this little section a woods. That should bring me out around the far end a the remote lots north a the casino.

Hope the snow's not drifted too deep. Cuts eight miles off easy and keeps me from being found. Sure can't expect help from casino security. They'll figure the three of us are in on the play together—and look into that lady dealer, too—and our friendship just went as sour as those hot dogs there.

x

So, you're awake again. Eatin' again, are you? No? Why are you fussin' with that leg? Hey, pal. That's your blood, not mine, huh? You hurt, too?

Easy boy. Let me take a look at that.

If I can't get you out a the door, 'cause you're hurt, I'll just have to fix you up.

Is this mangled or what? Look's like barbed wire. Or a trap. *Easy, fella.*

Just what I thought I'd be doin' tonight. Pettin' a wolf and fixin' to bandage its foreleg. *Be right back. Stay.* Tone a voice seems to calm him. If he only knew that I'm so scared I could sneak right past him into that corner and spend an hour leavin' behind what he's frightenin' out a me. But I can't show him that. Good thing I got practice at bluffin' from my time in casinos.

Steady now, fella. Artie here's goin' to rinse this off with some water first. That's the way. Good fella. Then I'm wrappin' this bandage around your leg. See, like here on my head and my arm? Same way. Twins. You and me. Like Romulus and Remus. Sure.

Keep that rumblin' right there in your throat my friend. And make sure you leave those lips right over those little red riding hood teeth a yours. I like your ears laid back, too. Amazin' what a few library books'll teach you when you're in a pinch. Just never imagined I'd be taken for an alpha wolf another would let himself subordinate to.

That should keep you, fella. Now. If you don't mind me walkin' past. *That's a good boy.* I really need to be gettin' on. *See ya, fella. Good luck.*

xi

Wind-stuck snow's coverin' some of the letters. But it is a sign for REMOTE PARKING. Can't believe I made it. Guess those weekends with the scouts in Maine gave me something I didn't know I had. It's almost daylight, too. Just enough time to get the car and go. Thank

God for the old AA fallback. Not enough lifetimes ago. But addin' two lifetimes tonight's pushed 'em back some.

From AA days: for those unfortunate times I lost my keys or had some public-spirited bartender take 'em. A little baling wire inside the back bumper to strap in an extra set. Bingo. Almost makes me want to break out into a chorus a "we're in the money."

Though, too bad it ain't so. Thanks to those two bastards.

And the gall they have to leave their car right next to mine. Feel like takin' this key and scratchin' the daylight out a his paint job. But these here are sick puppies. They'd trace Bonnie's plates and come after me up in Maine. Best to part company with 'em. Now. While they're still inside. Bet they had a warm space and a hot meal last night. And I can't even get a coffee for the ride home. But at least I get to go home. Didn't look like it for a while there. There should be a brush in the trunk to clear off the windows.

Kee-rist almightee. What did these guys do? What bastards. They roll me for my cash. They drive me off to nowhere in a snowstorm. They shoot me and leave me for dead. And they have the crust to use my car trunk for their stash. So, if they get caught inside and their car's torn apart by security, nothin's found.

Sweet Jesus, Lord and Redeemer. My 22 grand's the edge a the glacier.

There must be another hundred grand in here. Well, I'm takin' mine and gettin' the hell gone. Greedy, cocksure bastards. Mine's still in the money belt. And, ugh, that's heavy. Now the rest is down in the snow in their duffel under the driver's door where they can see it. And that's that.

Come on, baby Bonnie. Start. I know you're cold. But so am I. I left you my coat that whole time. Let's hear that deep-throated roar that's goin' take me home. I'm waitin' for your motor to turn in the cold. To come alive.

But all I hear is glass breakin' in the window behind me. And all I feel is cold metal against my ear. I look in the rearview and Fat Boy's standin' behind my car, so I can't back out. In the sideview, Cowboy's tellin' me to turn off the engine. Great. I never heard it even start with all the glass and shoutin' and what not. I can't bear to go through this again. I am not gettin' out a this car. Hell with it. Let the bastard shoot me here.

Your money's under your car, you bastard. What am I thinkin' about? Aggravatin' an unstable thief who's already tried to kill me once. And he's still got the gun. To my head, no less. It's only just about dawn. There's no one here but us three.

Of all the luck. I so wanted to go home again. I would have gone without the cash. I wasn't headin' back into the casino to find 'em. I wasn't goin' to make trouble for anyone. And look the hell where it got me. I should a gone after those bastards. At least I would have died with a fightin' chance.

There's the shoutin' again. But it's not the Cowboy. And his gun is lighter against my head. It's Fat Boy in the rearview screamin' his brains out and hoppin' around holdin' his hand. Cowboy forgets me and runs to Fat Boy. I can see in my side and rear view mirrors. The both of 'em.

Fat Boy is raisin' his arm. There's blood pourin' out from his wrist. He's screamin'.

But I can't make it out. They've forgotten me. I'm openin' this door and gettin' out. I have to know what's goin' on. Cowboy lets loose a round from his handgun. I'm duckin'. But, wait. He's not firin' at me.

They both have their backs to me and they're lookin' into the woods. I must be stupid. But they're still in the way a my car. I'm frozen to the spot. Not the cold this time. Just confusion. I should run. But my feet won't.

And then in the echo of another gunshot I hear it. Only 'cause I heard it back at home in Maine do I know. Only that I heard it while I knelt in my henyard amid the blood and the feathers. I heard the wolf howl. Here. Not back there. Now. Not back then.

Now Fat Boy's yellin' even louder. Sayin' stuff about the spirit a the Mashantuckets comin' after 'em in the body of a wolf.

"Who ever heard a wolves in goddamn Connecticut," he pleads to the Cowboy. Cowboy tells him to shut up. He's aiming the handgun and tryin' to hear where the wolf's got to.

"My fingers are disconnected. My fingers are on the ground." That's Fat Boy screamin' again. Now Cowboy turns on him. Tells him to shut his face or he'll die of a bullet to the head. Then he turns to me and aims the gun. I start to duck again. But I cringe instead because the growl grabs my heart.

Even for a three-year-old he has long, strong teeth. They make all a Cowboy's wrist disappear from my view. Whoever missed that pup with a firearm earlier in his life didn't do Cowboy any favors. This smart one knows what Cowboy is holdin'. And when their bodies hit, they both go down. Even not full grown, a running, leaping wolf packs some speed and force. Cowboy's hat just flew one way and his gun the other. He's punchin' the wolf upside the head and that breaks the bite free.

Fat Boy is now sittin' in the snow, moanin'. He's not near the car anymore. Cryin' out loud that he can't see. The snow's swirlin' 'round him. It's makin' him dizzy. That and losin' blood. He's whimperin' about bein' disoriented. Yup. No foolin'. That's what he's sayin'. And that he's scared.

Cowboy wants none of it. Lookin' for his gun, he's ignorin' Fat Boy 'cept for screamin' back at him and threatenin' him like before. I can't see the gun. Or else I'd run to get it. The action's movin' closer to the woods at the edge a the parking lot, under the lights, showin' less now that daylight's comin' on. They're further away from our cars, now.

Wolf is poised and his elders would be proud. Hell, I am. And I'm only his surrogate pappy. His front legs are splayed, just slightly. His hackles are up. So's his tail. He's kind a duckin' down low, extendin' his snout, and bearin' down on Cowboy with both eyes. He's locked on the Cowboy's eyes. From my angle, he looks like he's spotted himself reflected

there. Right between the big hatless man and his gun. Both hat and gun are grounded and already dusted with snow.

Fat Boy cries out again, wailin'. Wolf gets distracted, lookin' to see if he has to defend his flanks. Fellow wolves would usually take care a that in a group hunt. But he's like me. A loner. He looks away just long enough to encourage Cowboy to go for the gun. He beats the young wolf to the gun, but Wolf's clamped on his wrist again. I didn't think a man's arm could jerk around so much without snappin' off. Guess they both know it's a fight to the death. Now it does just that. Snap, I mean. Bent back real awkward like. Cowboy's painful howl's more bloodcurdling than Wolf's. But that grip isn't easin' up on his arm. Wolf hitches his bite, lets up, and catches it again to be sure he's got it. Each time, his teeth sink deeper. And now the blood's spurtin'.

Fat Boy gets up, wobbles, and now he's tauntin' Cowboy. This is too much. I can't believe it. He's sayin' it's sure fine for Cowboy to scream when he's hurtin', but it's not okay that he complains. Crazy thing is, Fat Boy's not even seein' Cowboy and Wolf goin' at it. He's lookin' away into the woods, not the edge a the lot. He doesn't seem to know where he is at all. Or where they are.

With a lunge a power, Cowboy's tuggin' Wolf after him. He's after the gun. They both go down, slippin' and slidin' in the snow. Cowboy's reddened footprints don't last, smudged out by Wolf's fur sweepin' right behind.

Wolf's eyes turn up and show only white for a moment. This isn't good. It's a sign he's givin' up. *Get him, boy. Don't quit.* My shout startles 'em both, infuriatin' Cowboy, but energizin' Wolf. I know you're just a young one, but keep at him, Wolf. And he does.

Cowboy's grabbin' Wolf's foreleg to get it off his face. He's on to the bandage. He flashes me a look. At mine wrapped around my head and arm. He screams at me that I knew. "How could you," he demands? And he reaches back for the gun, stretchin' over behind himself. He's left his neck open. Wolf loosens his hand and Cowboy gets the gun. Fat Boy yells at him 'cause he thinks Cowboys was screamin' at him, not me. Wolf sinks his muzzle into the hollow a Cowboy's unprotected throat. Blood's shootin' out everywhere. I can't see Cowboy's face, for Wolf's head. I can only thank God.

But Cowboy has the gun and can see Fat Boy. Fat Boy's turned around from the woods now and I can see him beyond the two combatants. I can hear him mockin' Cowboy, that he's gettin' what he deserves from the revengin' wolf sent by the Mashantuck spirits. Wolf is shakin' Cowboy by the neck and pullin' him along in the snow. How Cowboy does it, I'll never know. But he gets off a single shot, catchin' Fat Boy in the center a his left eye. I see more a his head explode from the exit wound than I can see damage in his eye socket. That's just an empty hole now. It doesn't have the burn marks I wiped off the side a my head back in the park office building.

Wolf freezes and lets go a Cowboy at the sound a the shot. Fat Boy's takin' two steps forward. Stops. Stretches out his arms toward Cowboy, somehow. He must already be dead.

He shakes from bottom to top. Falls forward. Some scarlet snow dusts up around him where he lands. I've never seen the likes of it before. Hope never to again.

Cowboy starts crawlin' away from Wolf, real groggy like. Trying to hold himself up with one arm and holdin' his throat with the other. Wolf crashes into him from the side, flippin' him up in the air a bit. They're both off the ground. Cowboy's front facin' Wolf. Cowboy lands on his side and back, with Wolf's fangs sunk into the softness a his belly. He puts both paws on Cowboy to keep him still and yanks part a his insides out right there onto the snow. I swear to God Cowboy sees himself stretched out in the snow as Wolf's divin' in for a second time. Thank God he isn't turnin' to look at me as he dies. I don't think I could take it.

Wolf steps back. He's not eaten any a Cowboy. Soon as Cowboy's still, Wolf stops. He looks at Fat Boy. Then back to Cowboy. Now he paces between 'em. He nuzzles the gun on the ground with his snout. Standin' still, he shifts his gaze. We are locked eye-to-eye. His long tongue sweeps away the blood off his muzzle.

Turnin' to the woods, he walks slowly out a the lot. Scales the ridge a snow, plowed there in the night. His head swivels to see me a last time. He pivots his head up and lets out a howl that raises the hair on the back a my neck.

Now he's over the top and gone.

xii

I know that a hundred grand is a lot a money for me to leave on the ground back there. Just hope it snows enough to cover my tracks. And Wolf's. Security will take a while to figure it out. That money should help 'em. Once they've reviewed the security cameras.

'Course, they'll check on me when they see me with 'em at Black Jack. But all I'll have is the money they know I won.

I came to get that much. That's what I'm comin' away with. Though not just the cash. I'm leavin' with a lot more. Not the least a which is my life.

Up by the Mobil I hope to get somethin' to eat. And a coffee. Boy, could I use a coffee.

I'll use their gents to get cleaned up a bit. See, too, if they'd have a spare cardboard box I could flatten out. To seal this window with. After smashin' it with his gun, Cowboy's left me no choice but to fix it for the ride back home.

Got a few miles to think on it. But, I figure maybe I'll just call home, too. Wouldn't want 'em to be worryin' any more than need be.