

## The Gulls

The world is flat.

Its edge is just over Killy Bridge. When people leave Killdeer Key, they fall off.

Nobody ever comes back. Not a damn one.

At least that's what Bobby Cullen says.

And as far back as Wayne Pilsen could remember, Bobby was right.

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Wayne sat on the old floral couch his mama had picked out before she died—How long had it been now? Ten? Eleven years?—and drunken thoughts had were getting the best of him.

Blues had faded to grays, greens to yellows, and the pinks to dirty whites. The bamboo armrests were chipped, gouged, and even burned. Daddy wasn't always the ashtray type. It smelled mostly of smoke but every once in a while, like tonight, swore he could smell his mama.

Rain and wind hammered the aluminum double-wide like a steel drums. Everything had to be bolted down outside and cheesy lawn ornaments (flamingos, gnomes in bikinis, parrots a-fucking-plenty) hidden in garages—or in the Pilsen's case, their living room. The two cracked and faded flamingos the family had come to know as Gertrude and Burp sat on lawn chairs, named by Wayne and long-gone sister, Bev, their post-legs sticking through the crisscrossed nylon straps. They eyed Wayne with beady black eyes.

The storm's only upside was it forced folks to huddle up inside with a few good books and ample amounts of booze until Mother Nature decided to stop giving it good and hard to the Florida Keys. Wayne Pilsen lived for it—especially those years it closed up Daddy's shop for

days and even weeks—and made the most of it these last two nights. He'd been on a bender for more than a day, sleeping little the night before, and waking with what felt like an ice pick through the back of his head. Aspirin didn't take, but hair of the dog seemed to work just fine.

Drinking wasn't normally one of Wayne Pilsen's pastimes; in fact, he rarely touched the stuff. Maybe a beer here, a beer there, but it was a rarity he'd have even two in one sitting. After seeing what it did to his daddy every day, the appeal was lost on him. But after work yesterday, in their linoleum-covered kitchen from decades past, he was in need of a numbing agent. Not the kind from one from one of Daddy's temper tantrums that left him bruised and aching. This was a deeper need.

A need to numb everything.

He'd gone to the freezer to ice a swollen cheek that'd begun to purple into another bruise, the latest of many he'd received from his daddy for doing something wrong, or not looking at him the right way, or breathing too loud, or—

Wayne couldn't keep track anymore.

It was then the rusting old Frigidaire spoke. *I've got what you need, Wayney. Pull a few from the back. Daddy will never know.*

One became two, two became five, and five became thirteen, an unlucky number that Daddy would surely notice. He sat on the floral couch with a dime-store book he'd picked up the other day; a short yarn about a gunslinger chasing a devil across the desert. When the words got too fuzzy, a yodeling Dwight Yoakam from the crackly cassette deck in the corner kept him company instead.

The cheap beer went down like water as Wayne even danced a bit for his flamingo audience.

“*Gee-tars, Cadillacs . . .*” he slurred at the birds and winked. He stumbled as he took a long swig and smiled devilishly at his pink friends. “My, my! You ladies look delightful tonight. And *woo-wee* those pink skirts . . . you’re all legs!”

He’d expected his daddy to come stumbling through the door any minute, drunk and ready to talk business with his knuckles. *Didn’t I tell you not to read any more of them stories?* or *What you doin’ dancing around like some kind of queer?* or *What the fuck did you do with my beer?* Or all of the above.

Probably all of the above.

Lucky for Wayney, Daddy’d never made it home last night. He’d finished up work after Wayne, drove over to Coconutz to drink with Sheriff Sutton, met a visiting optometrist from Miami, and spent the night in her parent’s vacation home she’d inherited after they croaked up in Vermont.

*Don’t expect me home ’til Sunday. Keep outta fuckin’ trouble.*

So he drank to his heart’s content. It was Saturday mid-afternoon that dams began to break, thoughts and contrition seeping through widening cracks. Wayne began contemplating his existence—something Daddy would surely call *hippie bullshit*—and what the hell he was still doing on Killdeer Key. Living with his daddy. Eating a shit sandwich day in, day out.

He had numbed his inhibitions, all right. The booze was an explosive, powerful enough blow the lid off his brain and it was painless and wonderful. Sunlight hit the gray matter and flowers—like the faded ones on his mama’s couch—bloomed and wilted.

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Wayne loathed working for his daddy at the fish market, Land Lubber’s, the hole-in-the-wall, grade-A shithole Willy Pilsen owned. He even hated that stupid name. Daddy’d taken to

hitting him at the counter lately, even in front of the customers. Most recently, in front of Mary Gilespie, his high school crush from the prehistoric age.

But she was still so beautiful—still so creamy and perfect—he couldn’t help but gawk. Two kids from some jerk who’d done and left her hadn’t affected that soft, skinny frame and he still longed for her. He’d felt an erection coming on like all the uncontrollable ones from years ago. Full salute. God, she hadn’t aged a day. Wayne’s eyes met hers and she smiled. Daddy noticed this small, utterly rare moment of bliss and, as always, rained down on his parade with a hard clout across the ear.

Mary gasped, frozen. Wayne froze, too. Blood worked its way into his face from the pain, but mostly sheer embarrassment. She frowned. There was pity in that frown. Pity for such a pathetic specimen as Wayne Pilsen. She abandoned the seasoning salt on the wrong shelf just to get the hell out of there. With every little step of those petite little Keds, his anger tweaked higher, like dragging a stick up a xylophone until she was out the door.

He turned to his daddy, face purple and irate. All Willy Pilsen did was smile.

“What are you gonna do, hit me?” His yellowy, tar-stained teeth beamed. His purple gums had receded to the roots. “You’re a chickenshit pussy, little Wayney. You don’t have the balls.”

He didn’t. Wayne turned away, his anger cooling to shame. It was the closest he’d come in his god-forsaken life to fighting back—hitting back—and it wasn’t even *that* close. Instead, he shrank as he always did. His daddy hit him again, then took by the back of his shirt.

“You can fuck her if you want, Wayney,” Daddy said, leaning in real close. Wayne smelled the stale beer on his breath at two in the afternoon. “But don’t think for one second you’re leaving Willy Pilsen.”

*“Nobody leaves Willy Pilsen.”*

He had no friends. Not anymore. A young waiter, Bobby Cullen, was the only person who took time out of his day to chat with him when he delivered fish to Coconutz. The friends he once had were long gone. Curtis Lee, his best childhood buddy, had packed up his orange Camaro shortly after Wayne’s sister had flown the coop, headed for the mainland to work for the state of Florida, and that was before his mama passed.

Curtis never came back to visit and Wayne never saw him again.

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Now, it had grown dark on night two of his time in Pissville. Rain pattered against the roof and blowing palm shadows danced across the walls. Leonard Cohen spoke his dirges in the darkened room from the cassette deck’s radio on a station he’d never been able to pick up before. The couch smelled strongly of his mother.

*Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya . . .*

There was no moonlight, but his truck seemed to glow in the driveway. Much like the old Frigidaire, it called to him and invited action. He brimmed with a deepened need. Purpose.

*Act, Wayney . . .*

These were the kind of fleeting thoughts that meant everything in the moment, utterly bright and brilliant and *deep*; they united ideas and lives and worlds with cosmic glue. Come morning, though, they were the kind that lost their magnificent glow, broken up in dull fragments, extinguished in the aching, stale coming of sobriety.

*Act now.*

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So he got in the truck and drove like hell. If Bobby was right, and there was a cliff at the

end of the world, he was going to take it at well over eighty miles per hour with a beer in his hand. Anywhere—even getting sucked into the big black nothingness of space—was better than Killdeer Key.

In the short time between his drunken premonition and climbing into the truck, he cleaned out his daddy's sock drawer, stole six more cans of liquid courage out of the fridge, and took his Willy Pilsen's beloved .44 Magnum. Two empty cans already rolled and clamored in the bed not a half mile out of the Pilsen's driveway on Tortuga Lane.

*Redneck wind chimes guide me.*

When that truck started, so did courage. Turning the key took every ounce of his frail being, but once it turned over, so did Wayne Pilsen. This needed to mark his last Saturday in their old double wide. It had to.

Memories, old souls, and the forgotten swirled. Clots melted away. It was like smelling things of the past all at once.

*Smells ring bells*, his mama used to say.

One smell wafted oldest and truest: there'd always been something very off about Killdeer. Kids ran off and never came back. As far as he knew, nobody even cared to go looking for them. They were rarely mentioned again, and if a lost soul came up in a conversation, eyes found the floor and subjects were changed.

His sister was one of those escapees. The Killdeer natives lived with a kind of forced ignorance. They feared discussing such occurrences. They feared Killdeer Key was listening.

*Nobody leaves Willy Pilsen . . .* and yet, she had.

Surely there was hope for Wayne; a grown man with a bit more knowledge of the world than a bunch of runaway kids.

He glanced in the rearview mirror and two bloodshot eyes stared back. They sank into a pallid face. An *old* pallid face. Puffy dark bags pulled at his lower lids with the weight of too many years. He looked like his father.

Wayne had been an imaginative child. His dime-store books provided worlds outside his own. His daddy never liked them, and eventually forbade them.

“Puttin’ too many liberal ideas in that noggin’ of yours,” he’d slurred.

*Nobody leaves Willy Pilsen.*

He was only able to read after his drunken daddy had passed out. They still gave him a form of escape, but the exciting boyish fantasies of *really* escaping seemed to pass with his mother. The monotony of life on Killdeer Key wore him down to a nub and his father all but extinguished his sense of self.

Bob Seger screamed and rasped from the speakers.

Was there still time? Or was he damned to working behind the counter at Land Lubber’s with this drunk daddy until the old bastard finally gave in to a cancer that surely *must* be coming his way?

Daddy drank and smoked like the devil, made a boatload of money from the fish market and somehow his poor mama bit the dust first; a woman who didn’t even have the tolerance to finish a glass of wine; a woman who’d never smoked a cigarette in her life and got cancer anyway.

Wayne could only hope once he stared across Killy Bridge, he’d have the courage to look his future in the face. If Willy came looking or got Sheriff Sutton to radio the north keys for help, his current escape would be short-lived and the grandest of beatings would be waiting for him back in that doublewide.

*Nobody leaves Willy Pilsen.*

Water crept up onto low spots in the road, becoming more pond than puddle as Mother Nature continued to bawl. Wayne rounded the north end of Killdeer to the west side and took the puddles well over the speed limit. The Chevy hydroplaned on one side or the other when she hit the big ones.

If it wasn't the big puddles, it was downed branches and sticks. He rolled over them and they crunched like wooden bones. It gave him a kind of weird satisfaction, like he was trampling this dark place, breaking the witch-knuckled Gumbo Limbos and writhing Banyans that reached out from the shoulder of the road.

Soon the foliage shrank back as he came upon Killdeer Village. His daddy's fish market was a quarter mile up on the left, and he felt it coming. It was thick. Oh, how he hated that fucking fish market. Between it and his daddy, they'd robbed him of the best years of his life. Or at least what was supposed to be, according to his books.

*Books are my only friends.*

How pathetic. His knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

Headlights reaching out like desperate feelers in the night, he drove down Parrot Parkway through the heart of town toward the boundary of his known world. Cheerful thoughts of the life he might lead outside—maybe even a late start in college—crept into the front of his mind.

"College is a scam for liberal yuppies," Daddy had once said. "'Sides, I need you sellin' meat at the store. Someday, if you don't piss me off too much, I might leave it for ya."

The thought of owning that place could not have been more repulsive. Wayne passed the dimly lit *Land Lubber's* sign on the right without a glance, fearing eye contact with the fish market might pluck the courage from him—shrivel up his balls and send him back home. Even at



nearly fifty miles per hour, time slowed and he could only slog by.

*Look at me, Wayney. Look at me! I've sucked the years out of you but I'm still hungry.  
Still soooo hungry Wayney. Look at me!*

He refused. Instead, he sucked back the remaining beer in the can and tossed it through the window into the truck bed before opening another, drowning the sobering nags of the place before it could put dangerous sensibilities in his head.

*Think of Mama*, he reassured himself.

*Why couldn't Daddy have gone first?*

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Every day Daddy'd bring home raw fish that had passed its time of freshness—sometimes considerably so—from Land Lubber's to feed the gulls out back. The smell was unbearable. The sack sat out back each night and the breeze often brought in the dead smell to Wayne's room.

Once, when Mama had cooked grouper that wasn't to his liking, he went out back, brought in a piece of the spoiled gull food, forced it into her mouth and made her chew it.

He grabbed her by the jaw while she cried and dry-heaved, half the piece of rotting meat dangling from lips, and said, "If you ever cook like shit for me again, I'll make you eat the whole fucking bag." She ended up in the bathroom on her knees, vomiting for most the night.

When Daddy looked in on her later, after the Marlins were down 0-6 in the bottom of the eighth, he'd said, "Don't you dare think about leaving me, Delores. *Nobody* leaves Willy Pilsen."

As he did whenever she cried, Wayne brought her an old pink washcloth with seashells to dry her eyes. There were no tissues in the house—an extravagance Willy Pilsen found unnecessary, because he wasn't going to bring up faggots or crybabies—and toilet paper seemed

less than chivalrous; the pink washcloth had become the magic wipe for Mama's tears.

"Here you go, Mama," he whispered.

She took it and smiled. "Someday," she'd said. "Someday."

Someday never came.

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The road began curving. To his left, a gull stood at the side of the road. He heard it scream even over the nearly floored engine.

It looked at him through the windshield as he roared by. A black dread spread up from his gut. A ridiculous thought popped into head: *Daddy's watching me through its black little eyes . . . does he know already?*

Nobody asked Willy Pilsen why he fed the disgusting things. Nobody dared asked Daddy much of anything.

Every night after work, he'd walk out back of the house with that lumpy feed bag and just the sight of him would drive the gulls into a frenzy. Daddy'd feed them half then and half the next morning. It amazed Wayne they never tore the bag open while the humans slept. They waited—waited for their master to feed them rot for breakfast.

Mornings he'd set down his coffee with a cigarette pursed between his lips, pick up the bag, and fling a piece with his bare hands out into the lot of them, usually twenty to thirty gulls in all.

There was fighting, screeching and the flutter of dirtied wings. The single piece of meat probably passed between ten different beaks before one of them finally managed to down it.

They looked ratty and discolored, nothing like the ones you'd see in a textbook, and much older than they should. As much as Daddy fed them, they should've been a healthy white

and more patient about their food.

But they were always ravenous. Always ready to rip at meat as if it'd been days—or weeks—since they'd last gotten a decent meal.

Then they'd all look back to Daddy for more.

Begging.

Screeching.

And the worst part? If you listened to them enough—let them really work their way into your ears—they'd begin to sound human.

Daddy flipped the pieces one at a time, always watching with tempered amusement. The smell was beyond words, but that didn't bother Daddy. He'd smoke his cigarette with the same fingers that flung each rancid piece. His closeness to the birds made Wayne's stomach curdle.

"He gets off to it," Bev, Wayne's sister, had once told him. "I've seen the stiffy in his coveralls when he does it. He feels power when they fight over scraps, just like he feels power over us when he takes out his fists. The only difference is he loves those birds more than he loves us."

*Bevvy . . .*

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Beverly Pilsen was the prettiest girl in school. Boys chased after her like the paparazzi stalk movie starlets. Girls loved and loathed her for her looks.

She and Wayne had been close. Very close. She was six years older and the age gap was enough to dispel most fights and rivalries siblings had. As broken as Mama had become, Bevvy was the closest thing he'd had to a hero.

They listened to Mama's Eagles records in Bev's room, watched Johnny Carson together when Daddy passed out early, and even gave Wayne his first cigarette. He'd coughed until he really thought his lung might end up on the front lawn. She'd laughed and said *That'll teach you to go near these*. He hadn't since.

She'd given him his first sex talk, his first dance lesson, and his first driving lesson; his first swig of beer, his first double-dog-dare, and his first real encouragement to be whatever the fuck he wanted to be. Bevvie looked out for Wayne and Wayne thought Bevvie was *it*. It didn't get much better for siblings. In fact, he knew it didn't. She was perfect.

The night it happened, a couple years before his mama died, Daddy threw open Wayne's door and caught him reading in bed: *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson.

"Those goddamn books. Why can't you go out and shoot shit with your BB gun, or beat your meat like normal boys your age when their door is closed?"

Wayne elected to say nothing. Nothing good came from speaking.

"Put that trash down and come with me," Daddy slurred, beer in hand. "We're gonna sit a while."

Wayne followed and they sat on the new floral sofa in dark silence, the only sound the wet sucking of beer out the can and heavy gulps. Wayne knew better than to ask what was going on. Daddy's cigarette glowed a bright orange every time he took a heavy drag.

Wayne was sure something awful was coming.

They sat like that for almost an hour. It all became clear when Jasper Higgins pulled up, the boy Bevvie was seeing, and Willy told Wayne, "You're gonna learn tonight how to treat a woman who don't mind you."

Wayne had begun to sweat. He clutched the edge of the couch, his knuckles a ghostly

white, helpless to warn her, as they often did when Daddy was pissed at one of them. He couldn't do shit but sit and wait.

Bev bounded up the walkway, drunk as a skunk, all smiles in the moonlight. They watched her fiddle with the door handle as quietly as she could, hoping she was in the clear for her curfew that expired two hours ago. Daddy slowly got up and moved to intercept her. Her tardy slip came in the form of a fist.

Daddy flipped the lights on and broke her nose, did God-knows-what to her swollen cheekbone, and busted two of her front teeth. She ended up swallowing both.

As she lay on the floor, a broken mess in a puddle of her own blood and spit, all he said was, "Look at what you made me do. Beverly" He grabbed her by the hair and whispered, "No daughter of mine is gon' be driving around town and gettin' knocked up by some bumblefuck from the Higgins family." Spittle hung from his lips. "And don't dare thinking about leaving me, Bevvv. Don't you dare. *Nobody* leaves Willy Pilsen."

He finished his beer, crumpled the can, and threw it at her. He turned to Wayne, flashed that drunk, yellowy sadistic smile they knew, and said, "I hope you learned somethin' here tonight, Wayney." His eyes looked black. Black as death.

Daddy then went to the bedroom, told Mama she had a whore of a daughter, slammed the door, then did God-knows-what to a woman with stage three cancer.

Wayne had heard it all from within the walls of his room in the double-wide over the course of his thirty-one years. His dime-store used books helped turn down the volume, but it still played in the background. He'd often read horror and not know it; the terror of home ripped the guts out of anything trying to be scary.

Wayne tore himself from shock that had reached its fingers deep into his stomach. He'd

helped Bev off the doormat and into the kitchen. He was scared for her; it was the most blood he'd seen come out of a living thing.

"I'm getting out, Wayne," she'd sobbed. Blood had run down her black pleather jacket and even some into her pretty blonde hair. "I'm getting out. I have to."

She'd paused and took his hand.

"I'm pregnant."

Wayne had wanted to cry.

"It's Jasper's and I can't have it here, I just can't! Not around *him*. I hate to leave Mama, but I just can't have it here with Daddy. I won't!"

She pulled him in close and cried into the nape of his neck. The blood was warm, but the tears were hot.

"Come with me," she'd said later that night, standing at the door with a packed bag.

But he hadn't. He'd cowered as he always did. Jasper picked her up in his hand-me-down Ford Pinto. She stood at the front door, her face nearly swollen shut, and tried smiling. She raised a weak, limp hand as a goodbye.

"I'll come back."

*I'll come back . . .*

He thought about Bev as he drove, struggling to stay between the lines. Hoped she'd gone somewhere safe. Made a life for herself. Raised his nephew in a way Willy Pilsen was incapable of. But he hadn't heard from her since the night he let her go—a night that had passed almost eleven years ago.

It stung.

That morning Bev left, Daddy woke up, poured his coffee and went out back to feed the

gulls like he always did.

It was like that every morning. But the morning Bev left had been different.

His father'd said nothing. He walked past the coffee maker and his box of cigs on the counter and straight out the back door. The gulls watched him walk out and they stood silently.

No swarming, screeching or clawing. No fluttering, no hopping, no movement whatsoever. They'd all stared up at him like a congregation stares at a pastor in church, motionless and brooding, awaiting some dark benediction.

There was some kind of perverted understanding there; an unnatural connection between man and his island pets. Daddy'd looked them all over with admiration at the corners of his mouth and walked back inside.

"They're full this morning," he'd said, touching Wayne on the shoulder gently as he walked past to the front door. The screen door clanged shut, Daddy's truck backfired, and he'd gone to work.

Wayne had looked out the back sliding doors at them. And they'd looked back, unmoving.

*They're full.*

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After Bev left, Wayne's mother declined quickly. In the months before she died, she could no longer walk, and had bad spells daily. Senility had come knocking. She'd call for people who weren't there, long dead or unknown to Wayne. Eventually, Daddy couldn't take her "loco bullshit" any longer, so he moved her into Bevv's old room. Wayne handled the cleaning and rubdowns to keep away infections and bed sores. He cooked her meals (which soon came in the form of an IV bag) and sat with her, reading her his dime-store fantasy books, though he

doubted much of it stuck at the time.

She was reduced skin and bone, helpless as the flowering mutations in her body devoured her from the inside out. It got to the point where she required constant attention and Daddy refused to pay for hospice care, so he left Wayne home with her. Wayne didn't mind. It kept him out of Daddy's store. He could do without seeing her lady parts, but eventually so much of her shrank down, it was more like bathing a corpse than a woman.

She did a lot of rambling and had very few moments of lucidity. Her last moment, the day before she passed, Mama took his hand and said: "Your daddy was the handsomest boy in school. I used to drown in those big blue eyes . . . but this place changed him. Killdeer," she spat. "I drowned in those eyes, Wayne. Don't let them drown you, too."

He'd been the one to discover his mother the next day, after the cancer finally took her. The window had been left open and three gulls had found their way inside, picking at her face. The skin on her cheek stretched and snapped like a rubber band in one bird's beak.

It drove Wayne into a blind rage.

He closed the window, cutting off any means of escape, and killed all three with his bare hands. Their necks snapped easily. Satisfaction surged through him as he ended their disgusting lives. He tossed their bodies back out the window, their friends quick to pick their dead bodies apart.

Screeching.

Snapping.

*Tearing.*

Wayne went to her, knelt beside the bed, and moved to hold her hand one last time. He found it under the cover and in it, she clutched the pink washcloth.



He took it from her, placed it over his face, and wept fiercely.

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As he nearly lost himself down a rabbit hole of memories, he shuddered, holding back tears as best he could.

The road hit an intersection where he turned left, a straight shot to Route 1. Although Wayne was solidly plastered, he was thinking clearly, maybe more than he ever. He'd been a prisoner of this key for far too long.

Would there be a wall at Killy Bridge that he'd hit, crumpling his car? Tourists came and went like flies in the summer heat, but the townsfolk . . . they were a different story. Perhaps a big troll stood guard with a lever, trap door flipping open as the unworthy drove over it, dumping old trucks like his into the wet darkness of the sea below.

Wayne pushed the accelerator down harder. He planned to hit Killy Bridge at full speed, hopping over trap doors or shattering whatever magical barrier might be there blocking his way out. It had to work, didn't it? After all, he'd read it in a book once, and he was due his storybook moment.

He slowed to a stop at the base of Killdeer Bridge—Killy Bridge to natives—that ran perpendicular into US Route 1, just past the big blue *Come back soon!* sign with a smiling cartoon sun that looked relatively new, tropical colors beaming and friendly.

The rain made it impossible to see much farther than the sign, thick droplets splattering on the windshield, the blades whipping back and forth, too much water to keep up with. The rain grew audibly stronger as he considered driving forward, revving the engine, wishing he could throttle his bravery in the same fashion.

The static of storm allowed him to see very little, making the dizziness worse, even with

the car's headlights at his back. The beams reflected and bounced hopelessly off the rain, leaving him face to face with the unknown.

Adrenalin was pumping at the premise of a new world—or the end of it—now within reach. Should it be the latter, he'd already decided he was going to throw himself off, let the cold vacuum of space take him. Maybe a Martian or two.

A story he'd read to his mama popped into his head: *Silver Lightning*, the story of a car that had taken on its old owner's spirit. Danny Carson had escaped the demonic, dimension-traveling circus by hitting the gas, telling the Silver Lightning that he loved him, and crashing through the ringleader Amon Fulp's Magic Mirror to Nowhere. It shattered instead of sending them to Nowhere as intended, and the shards rained chaos down on Fulp and his evil circus.

Silly. But Wayne's foot found the gas pedal anyways.

"I love you," he whispered to the old truck. He stomped the accelerator to the floor.

At first, nothing happened; it took the old girl a bit to wake up, her purr becoming a roar. She thrummed and glided as if new, just off the lot, and purpose surged through both of them. Wayne found himself smiling.

His hope stacked as the truck tore across the bridge, wipers swooshing rapidly, headlights cutting through the static, until they found Willy Pilsen, standing in the road with a bag of guts and what looked to be a gull on his shoulder, like one of the old pirates who hunted key deer on the island that gave it its name.

Wayne's own Mirror to Nowhere was his daddy, and for a moment Wayne had every intention of running him down, dragging his body as far the truck would take it, and leaving him a ragged mess atop Killy Bridge.

Hesitation has a way of getting the best of you at inopportune moments. He swerved and

punched into the guardrail like a rock through papier-mache. The truck seemed to float.

Everything slowed as it hung in the air for an eternity. Time clicked back on and it his Silver Lightning hit black ocean with a force that drove him painfully into the steering wheel, cracking ribs and exploding the air from his lungs.

Ballooning black spots filled his vision and the darkness took him. When he came to, the truck was almost completely submerged, and once it dipped below the surface, his truck sank like a stone.

Water rushed into the Silverado through the dash and the back window, cold and sobering. His first thought was to get through the opening that served as a hole for his empty beers, but it was too small for his grown body.

The door wouldn't open. The handle moved as it should, but water pressure held the door shut: Killdeer Key wanted him to drown deep down in its guts.

Panic took him. This was it. He was born on Killdeer to die on Killdeer. A cruel joke, it seemed: the suffering, the abandonment, and the beatings were all he was meant for.

His heart drumming against his ruined ribs. Trying to calm himself with deep breaths that sent jolts of pain through his chest, he recalled a book he'd once read about escaping a sinking car.

*Wait.*

Wait?

*Wait.*

Pressure had to equalize.

The truck hit bottom with its front bumper first, the back tires finding the seafloor a moment later. The Chevy's headlights cut through the deep and shone on a watery cemetery. The

tombstones were vehicles. Dozens of them.

Trucks, cars, bikes, mopeds, even a battered and slimy orange Camaro a few cars to the left . . . but it was the nearest grave that caught his attention.

A Ford Pinto.

It was covered in sea algae. The strands danced and writhed back and forth in the headlights in unison. There was a single bullet hole through the windshield on the driver's side. In the driver's seat sat the skeleton of Jasper Higgins, a hole through his exposed skull above his right eye. He leaned slightly toward the center console, as if to peer around the hole in the glass and smile his lipless teeth.

Wayne thought of the gun—the same gun that probably put that hole in Jasper's forehead. Reaching under the rising pool, he opened the glove box, found the gun, tucked it into his waistband, and hoped to God it still worked.

Water had nearly filled the cabin and he pushed up against the roof to get one last good look through the top of the windshield. No one appeared to be in the passenger seat.

*Bevvy?*

Once completely submerged, he tried the door handle again, doing his best not to panic. His ears popped painfully as the door moved in liquid slow motion.

With one last look at the empty passenger's seat, he got his feet up on the roof of his truck and pushed off. After what felt like an eternity moving up through Killdeer's dark stomach, he surfaced and greedily sucked in the humid air.

He swam to the base of the bridge, ribs screaming in agony with each stroke. Large rocks made up a jagged seawall down from the road, ugly little bushes sprouting between them. Wayne hoisted himself onto one of the flatter stones and made his way upward.

Daddy was under the sign now, along with more gulls than Wayne had ever seen. He was tempted to run back to town, but Daddy would just as easily catch him.

When Wayne got close enough, the gulls looked at him and screamed in unison, crying tears of oil from their blackened eyes. The sound was deafening. Human.

Daddy had a devilish grin across his face, his own eyes pools of dark matter, seeping black malice like the gulls.

*What happened to my daddy?*

He flashed back to his mother's words: "Your daddy was the handsomest boy in school. I used to drown in those eyes . . ."

*Don't let them drown you, too.*

"Look like you seen a ghost, boy." Daddy lit a cigarette.

"Bevv—" Wayne's voice cracked. "Bevv wasn't down there."

"Your sister Bevv crawled outta the bay like you did just now." Daddy smiled as he took another drag. "Tough little shits I raised."

"What did you do with her?" Wayne sounded more like a child than a grown man.

"You got a 'preciation for the arts. What'd you think of my work down there?"

*"What did you do with her?"*

Another drag. "I gave her a choice like I'm 'bout to give you." He exhaled. "You can get in this fucking truck, we'll go home and I'll give you the beating you fucking deserve—"

Drag.

"—or I'll break your kneecaps right 'ere on this fucking bridge." He looked down at the bag of fish guts, then back at Wayne. "So long as yer covered in guts, these fellas won't know the diff'rence 'tween you and old meat. They'll eat it *all*."

The gulls chirped and glucked in excitement.

“What happened to *Bevvy*?” Wayne managed. He took ragged breaths, his heart thrumming painfully.

Daddy laughed. “You really wanna know?” Drag. Long exhale. “I shot her in her pregger little tummy right about where you’re standing. They ate her guts out while she was still alive, ’cludin’ that peckerhead’s little tyke she had growing inside her. Tossed it around like a chew toy.”

“You’re a fucking *liar*!” Wayne wailed. “I don’t believe you.” He hoped the daddy-thing was lying, but in his sinking heart, he knew there was dark truth.

“Some little son of a bitch took my gun tonight, so I went with plan B,” he smiled, giving the bag a couple loving taps. “It’s mostly innards. They stay stuck on a bit better. And when yer covered in ’em, my friends here won’t know the difference ’tween fish guts and Wayne guts.”

He threw his head back and howled. The gulls laughed with him..

The smile left his face. “Didn’t I tell you, boy? Nobody leaves Willy Pilsen.”

*Drag.*

“Nobody leaves *Killdeer Key*.”

Willy laughed, but this time, the laugh wasn’t his. It was wet and deep, like something else coming through. Something *old*.

“Say, boy, I don’t think I ever told you how much money I saved skippin’ your mama’s funeral.” He gestured to the gulls and chuckled. His voice was changing now, too. “You didn’t think that feed bag was *always* fish, did you?”

Wayne felt sick. Shocked. Infuriated.

He pulled the gun out from his waistband and brought it around, trained on Daddy.

The gulls screamed again. Some began to take flight.

No, not Daddy.

No more Daddy.

Only Willy-fucking-Pilsen. Or whatever the he was now. Maybe always was.

Willy maintained that evil grin. “Go ’head and kill your dear old daddy. But you’ll never know how to get outta this place.” He took two steps toward Wayne. “Do it!” he screamed. “I didn’t raise no fucking pussies. *Do it!*”

The magnum wavered. Wayne’s sweaty hand couldn’t hold it still. *End it*, he thought.  
*End it now.*

Willy Pilsen took a step closer. “Last chance, boy.”

His finger rested against a trigger that weighted a thousand pounds, but Wayne managed to pull it anyway.

*Click.*

Willy laughed, syrupy and *wrong*. “Shells a bit wet, boy?” He lurched closer.

The gun trained on Daddy’s head, Wayne pulled the trigger again.

*Click.*

And again and again.

*Click. Click.*

Willy hoisted the bag a little higher and opened the top with his free hand.

One of the more ravenous-looking gulls, gray and worn, dove at Wayne, screeching and flapping something furious. One talon sank deep into the side of his scalp, and the warmth of trickling blood was immediate. He pistol-whipped the bird as hard as he could, to the crunch of breaking bones; it flopped dead on the pavement.

Two more took flight directly at him, for his face, screeching, their talons drawn like hawks diving for prey. He clubbed one, nearly taking off its wing, but the other got its talons into Wayne's cheek and forehead. It pulled out a chunk of his hair. More blood. He managed to grab it by the tail feathers, pulled as hard as he could, and slammed it down into the road. He stomped it with his boot, sending a small spray of insides out its anus. It screamed and died.

All the while, Willy casually walked closer, smoking and smiling and laughing, his voice no longer something of this world. Soon those rancid guts would cover Wayne, and this would all be over. Birds would peck the life from him.

The .44 was trained on Willy Pilsen's head one last time until an idea took him.

*Plan B.*

His aim dropped down to the bag. Willy's smile melted; he hesitated a moment and drew back a step.

*Please God oh please God oh please God . . .*

"Wayney—"

Willy's words were silenced with a *click-boom* as the Magnum erupted. The bullet hit the feed bag and Willy Pilsen's arm, sufficiently exploding both.

And another. *click-boom*. The bottom of the bag tore open, along with what was once Willy's lower rib cage, and emptied down his leg and onto his boots.

The smells of gunpowder and decaying meat filled the air. It had grown completely silent; no gull made a peep. Wayne's daddy stood there dumbfounded, much of him covered in dark, curdled guts, mouth agape.



The vile things only looked at their master; their *alpha*. Many looked again at Wayne and back at Willy, their little heads flicking back and forth as if watching a game of ping-pong. Confused. Utterly confused.

Two of the older, ragged looking gulls made the decision for the group, took flight and dove, screeching wildly, at Willy. He raised his remaining arm to defend himself and they latched onto it like feeding perch. Three more joined them, snapping at whatever they could manage.

Some took to the bag, but most were on Willy. Slashing . . . flapping . . . tearing. Within moments, he'd fallen to his back on the pavement. He screamed in a voice that didn't belong, over and over, until it grew faint—became his own harrowing shrieks. There were at least a hundred gulls waiting their turns. Within moments, the most he could manage was a wet gurgle. Then only the ripping of flesh and insides.

The rain started pouring again, gently rippling his pooling blood with each drop that hit the expanding black mass. The gulls carried on mercilessly for what felt like hours, but Wayne was entranced. As he watched, a strange hunger befell him. He felt Killdeer. Its dark, maddening fingers prodding and poking, finding the empty places and filling him.

After they'd picked most of Willy Pilsen clean—both skin and guts—he witnessed something most amazing; a group of the winged vermin wrapped their talons around fleshy bones, flapped their wings and took slow flight with the carcass. A flap of hairy scalp and the smaller toes and fingers were the only parts of him left; they'd even eaten most of his clothes. The gulls flew him over the guardrail. They dropped him into water with what barely qualified as a splash and returned to Wayne's feet. The gulls eyed him puzzlingly.

*What's next?* they seemed to ask. Killdeer's strong, cold hands shrouded his heart.

Over a hundred black, drippy eyes stared into Wayne's soul.

He drowned in them.

~\*\*~

Two years later, Wayne Pilsen finished out the day at Land Lubber's Fish Market. He left Jerry Simmons, a part-time high school runt, in charge of closing up shop. He'd proven himself to be a good employee over the last few months, and Wayne intended to bring him on full time.

"Have a good one, Jerry. And remember to scrape that skillet clean and lock up. Can't have any drunk townies wandering in."

"I know, Mr. Pilsen. Have a nice night."

The evening air was dewy sweet as he walked across the small parking lot. It'd finished raining and a pink sun peeked through the thinning clouds.

Wayne reeked of fish and crab guts as he hopped into his truck, a hand-me-down from a certain daddy who was now gull food. His coveralls were a plethora of squirts and chunks hopped up from some of the necessary chopping and fileting. Jerry was good with the stove and counting money, but he hadn't mastered the art of slicing bellies and scooping out insides. You really couldn't leave Land Lubber's without stinking, but the smell didn't bother him.

You got used to it. Even when it was rotten.

The truck sputtered onto Parrot Parkway as he plodded home, windows down, radio up. He knobbed through George Jones, Jimmy Buffett, and Alabama until the tuning needle disappeared somewhere to the left of 88.3 and Leonard Cohen's deep voice played up through the crackling speakers.

*Baby I've been here before, I've seen this room and I've walked this floor . . .*

He rounded the north end of Killdeer Key, this time to the east. A gull stood on the

shoulder—the same shoulder—eyeing him with great curiosity as it had two years ago. It flew off in the rearview. Wayne had an idea where it might be headed.

He turned onto Tortuga Lane and Mary Gillespie Pilsen stood in the front window of their double-wide, smiling nervously, her hand resting on her bulging stomach. She was seven months along. They'd gotten to talking at Coconutz almost a year ago. Wayne exuded a new aura of confidence and she was immediately drawn to it. She couldn't stop complimenting his big blue eyes, his taking over his awful daddy's shop and his manly *smell*. She was knocked up a few months later.

Wayne gave her a little smirk and grabbed the bag next to him, hopped down out of the cab, and went up the walk—the same walk Bevvvy had stumbled up drunk as a skunk all those years ago.

Mary greeted him at the door and he kissed her, putting his own hand on her tummy. "It's gonna be a boy. I can tell," he said, just as he had each day since she started showing. They both smiled, although hers seemed a bit strained.

Her kids, now legally Wayne's also, Sandy and George, sat on a new corduroy couch. "Hi, Daddy Wayne," they said in unison. It still sounded coached and a bit insincere, but he gave them a nod of approval and went into the kitchen.

Wayne set his work bag down on the kitchen table and went to the fridge for a cold one. He sighed and took one of the remaining three. His fishy fingernail cracked the top with a satisfying *fssst* and he downed half of it in three gulps. He belched, calmly walked over to Mary.

And belted her across the mouth.

"Three beers, you dip shit? What the fuck am I gonna do with three beers? I told you to keep that fridge *stocked*." He slapped her again, drawing blood.

“I’m sorry, Wayne.” She held her reddened face and her lips began to tremble. “I had so much to do today that I forgot . . .”

Sandy buried her head into the couch cushions and George fled to his new room that once had of dozens of books hidden under the bed, but was now devoid of such things.

Tears welled in Mary’s eyes as she watched her boy run to his room and peek around the door, motioning her to follow. The boy would have to be dealt with soon enough, but his mother came first.

“You start cryin’ and I’m gonna break your goddamn nose,” Wayne said.

An empty threat now, but give him a few more rounds and that pretty nose of hers might not be so pretty anymore. He reached into his pocket and tossed his keys at her. She fumbled them and they clanged to the floor. She did her best to squat and grab them; with her pregnant stomach, she looked like a sumo wrestler assuming the position.

He grinned at her discomfort, then took the bag off the kitchen table, strolling out the back door on to the old cement patio.

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The night it all happened, Wayne went to Sheriff Sutton in a daze, soaked and shivering. He spilled—for lack of a better word—his guts. He’d expected the man to be taken aback, sickened. Sutton only nodded calmly. Wayne expected an urgent phone call to the state police after he’d finished. Sutton, fat and somewhat drunk already, moved to the liquor cabinet, poured two glasses of brandy, and brought one to Wayne. He plopped his large body down next to Wayne on his deer hide couch.

“Drink this,” he said. “It’ll warm you to the balls.” They both drank deeply. “No use startin’ a media circus, stirrin’ up old feelings by pulling all those dead’uns out from their graves.

You and me have to keep the peace, just like me and your daddy used to.” He put an arm around Wayne. His eyes had gone black. *Oozing*.

“Part of that peace is keeping the people *here*. On Killdeer. Spittin’ out babies and greasin’ the wheels of our little machine. Killy gets upset when the machine slows down . . .” he smiled with teeth as black and wet as his eyes.

“Some of our flock ferget what a great little place we’ve got here.” He eyed Wayne cautiously. Fatherly, almost. “Your job is to remind ’em from time to time.”

Wayne nodded, somehow understanding it all perfectly.

“Sides, no use cleanin’ up any of those cars when there’s room for plenty more. You just remember: *nobody* leaves Wayne Pilsen.”

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In the days after that night at the bridge, Willy was rumored to have run off north to the mainland with a heavily tattooed hooker from Key West within a day of his fling with one upset optometrist.

None of the sheep believed it, but, in their passive way, they accepted it with few whispers. The sheriff had made that night disappear, and the memory Willy Pilsen faded into obscurity while his body rested in his own graveyard at the end of the world.

The world is flat.

Wayne stood on his cement stage. Further into the yard was an old burn barrel for yard brush, garbage, and other things of past importance. Atop the growing level of ash in the rusted-out cylinder lay a crispy spine and an unusually large piece of ash where you could just barely make out the words *Silver* and *Lightning*.

He opened the feed bag for his audience, pulling out the first strip of rancid meat his

fingers touched. They stood in silence, as if waiting for a magician to perform his first trick.

Heads flicked between the strip of rotting hogfish and Wayne's fading blue eyes.

"Who's hungry?" he asked playfully.

The gulls screamed.