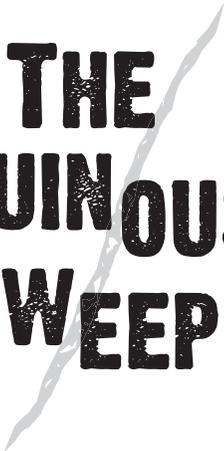


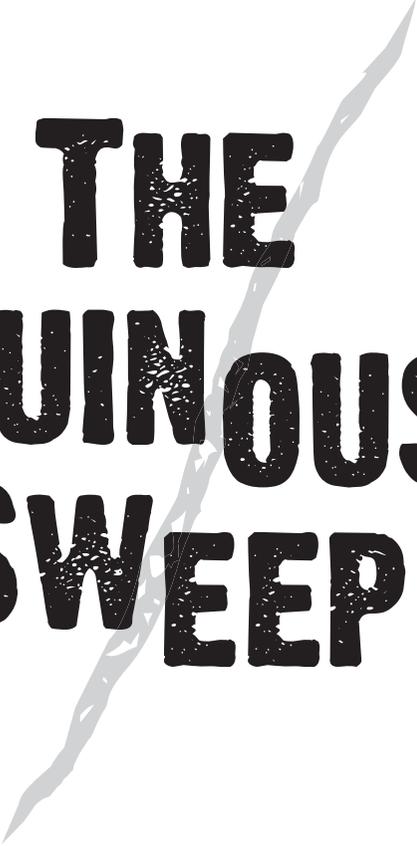
The
Ruinous
Sweep

Tim
Wynne-Jones

Winner of the Governor General's Award

**THE
RUINOUS
SWEEP**





THE RUINOUS SWEEP

TIM WYNNE-JONES



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For Amanda Lewis.
Let me count the ways. . . .

The stormy blast of Hell
With restless fury drives the spirits on,
Whirl'd round and dash'd amain with sore annoy.
When they arrive before the ruinous sweep,
There shrieks are heard, there lamentations, moans,
And blasphemies 'gainst the good Power in Heaven.

—Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, canto 5



I slipped quietly past the guards, saying no farewells,
and was soon a boy under the moonlight, my dear
companions left behind, my own kin long slaughtered,
nothing but my courage and lately learned skills to
carry on my journey.

—Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*

PART ONE



THE SPACE CAPSULE

CHAPTER ONE

The boy sat tight up against the passenger door. There was something breathing on the backseat. He hadn't noticed it when he'd climbed in out of the rain. He'd been too thankful, in too much of a hurry. But the shape of it had grown on his senses. From the corner of his eye he could see a pile of blankets. There—it moved! Something or someone.

“What's your name again?” said the driver.

Had he told him his name? He didn't think so.

“You got a name or what?”

Donovan. Dono.

“What's that?”

“Dono,” said the boy.

“You don't know your own name?” The driver burst out laughing, his belly jiggling against the steering wheel.

Under the laughter, Dono heard a low moan from

whatever was buried in those blankets. He grasped the door handle. He had to reach Bee somehow. She'd be worried sick. Bee . . . Yes . . . Beatrice. *She* didn't call him Dono. Who was he to her? Turn. That's what she called him. Turn.

"Sorry, kid. Nobody's turning."

"What?" He hadn't said it out loud, had he?

"Too late for that."

Dono held his breath and stared straight into the darkness beyond the twin cones of light.

Are you.

"What's that?"

The boy shook his head. "Nothing," he said. Why were his thoughts leaking out of him like this?

There was something he needed to remember. It was the start of a question—as much as he could recall. Behind it was a whole world of questions.

"You're a quiet one," said the driver. "Strong, silent type, eh?"

Donovan shook his head. He couldn't think—mustn't even try, not here.

"You don't look like a ball player."

Had they talked about baseball?

"I mean with the long hair and all. What—you tie it back like a girl with a piece of string?" The man waited for a response. Got none. "You listening?" he said. Then he wobbled the steering wheel a bit—a power trip—just to show who was boss in this speeding car on this lonely stretch of highway on this moonless night. "Hey, a little company'd be nice. What do ya say, Dono or Dunno or whatever it is you call yourself?"

“Thanks,” said the boy. “I’m just—”

“Boring as paint,” said the man. He burst out laughing again. “Hey, just joshin’ with you, kid,” he said, and punched Donovan in the arm.

“Ow!”

“Whoa! Just a love tap, slugger.”

Donovan reached up to rub his shoulder. He ached all over.

“Something wrong with you, kid?”

Yes. That much he knew. Something was very wrong.

“Just . . .”

“Just *what*? You on something?”

A good question.

“Gotta say, though, you got one helluva pair of shoulders on you! How’s a guy supposed to know you’re a wimp?”

“I’m not—”

“A sissy-boy?”

“I’m not *myself*, okay? Do you get that?”

“Well, forgive me,” said the man. “Forgive me for picking up your sorry ass in the rain. Forgive me for having a warm car and a big heart.” He patted Donovan’s knee and chuckled. He left his hand there, one hundredth of a second too long.

Dono slithered away from the man’s touch and began to weigh his chances. He’d had some tae kwan do. The guy was large but out of shape. He imagined he could take him if things got bad. Then again, he’d missed the class where you learned how to defend yourself in a speeding car.

Behind him, the blankets shuddered again. Just a drunk, he told himself. Sleeping it off. A drunk . . .

Then there was a low popping noise and a smell wafted forward from the backseat. *Jesus!* Dono pressed his face against the window as if trying to suck air from the darkness on the other side of the rain-splattered glass.

The driver chuckled. “God, I hate this job,” he said. He shook his fat head. Donovan stared out the corner of his eye at him, his face red in the dashboard lights. Red? He looked at the dashboard. What kind of car had red dashboard lights? The flesh of the man’s neck pressed against his collar, sagging over the frayed edge of it like dough left too long to rise. He turned his head Donovan’s way and smiled wearily.

There was a tatty green pine tree hanging from the rear-view mirror doing nothing to quell the stench. The little paper conifer wobbled dangerously, as if the car’s wheels were straddling some fault line in the earth and the Malibu was about to fly apart into a million shards of steel and glass and hapless humanity.

See. That was part of it. Something he wanted Bee to see?

“See what?” said the driver. “You see anything out there?”

“No. Sorry.”

“Man, you are one weird customer,” said the driver.

Donovan closed his eyes. He couldn’t take much more of this. He was so tired. Too tired to keep his guard up. Words were seeping from him in a slow drip. What was he doing? How did he get here? He searched the empty highway ahead. He was running from something. That had to be it. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw only darkness out the rear window, and below it the darkness of something under wraps, something still breathing but smelling as if it had stopped.

Donovan faced the front and gripped the door handle more tightly. Dared to close his eyes.

“Here’s the deal, Dono, my man. I got a job to do, okay? I don’t choose the work. I just do my job. Wouldn’t hurt to liven things up a bit. Tell me a bit about yourself. Your plans for the future.” That made the man laugh again—laugh himself into a coughing fit. “What do you say, boy?”

Donovan squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. Saw lightning. Tried to shake it away, which only made his head hurt. *Are you?* There it was again: the question.

“Am I what?” said the driver, irritated now. Donovan clammed up. His mouth was closed; his eyes were closed. He resisted covering his ears, but the desire was there to make himself inaccessible. He wanted to be anywhere but here.

“Well, if that’s the way you want it,” said the driver. “Have it your way.” And then the car started to slow down.

Dono’s eyes popped open. There was nothing but forest on either side of the road. “There’s this little rest stop up ahead,” the man said. “Don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to relieving myself.” He scratched at the wattles that hung from his neck as the speedometer needle drifted to the left. “Maybe you could give me a hand, eh?” he said, and then threw back his head and laughed.

“Oh!” said Donovan.

“That all you got to say? ‘Oh’?”

It was the other thing he needed to tell Bee, just as soon as he could.

“I asked you a question, son.”

“Shut up,” said Donovan.

“What’s that?”

Something trembled back to life inside Donovan, some struggling true piece of himself. “Forget about it,” he said.

“I’m not hearing this.”

“Yeah, sorry, you are.”

“I did *not* hear anyone in this vehicle say for-get-a-bout-it.”

There was a silence ripe with anger and resentment—the car shook with it. Any minute now it will all end, thought Donovan. The earth will open up and swallow us.

The man was breathing hard. “Ohhhh-kay,” he said, drawing out the syllables, “you asked for it.”

Suddenly the car swerved onto the shoulder and shuddered to a stop.

“How’s this? Close enough to nowhere for you?”

Donovan nodded slowly. “Nowhere’s good,” he said.

And then before he could even loosen his seat belt, the guy was shoving at him with thick fingers and meaty arms, shouting at him, swearing at him. “The great outdoors, asshole,” he said. “It’s all yours.” Finally the door shot open and Donovan fell out onto the gravel shoulder. The man threw the car into gear and started to pull away, howling with anger and frustration.

“Hey!”

Donovan twisted his foot free from the car and rolled out of its path as the back tires slewed in an arc toward him. The Chevy squealed to a stop, making the passenger-side door slam shut—*thunk!* Then the car swerved, churning up gravel, and shimmied back onto the rain-slick pavement.

Donovan sat in a heap on the cold shoulder, his foot aching, sprained or worse. The Chevy fishtailed down the

highway, the horn blaring triumphantly, as if the driver had just won the world championship of fat losers. He was perhaps the saddest primate on the planet at that moment, with the exception of the boy he had left sitting in the dirt.

The car's engine roared, then the Chevy suddenly squealed to a stop. Donovan looked up. The back left passenger door of the car opened—right in the middle of the highway—and out of it shambled the thing that had been on the back seat. It rose on two legs under its shabby greatcoat of blankets, backlit in red. A thick and seemingly headless figure, stumbling, hobbling, and lurching toward the other side of the highway. The back door of the car slammed shut, and again the driver took off. Dono watched the faltering figure reach the edge of the embankment, sway momentarily, and then seem to fall down the slope out of sight, lost in darkness.

The Chevy's engine feebled itself into the distance, until it was a sound smaller than the slow wind shivering the trees and the din of the amphibious life all along the ditch, peeping their little hearts out. Donovan listened. How shrill it was. How urgent. A fog rolled in until there was nothing left of sound but frogs and the wet-lipped wind.

CHAPTER / TWO

The boy lay tight up against the side rail of the gurney. Surely they had not placed him there like that, pressed so hard against the railing? His face was contorted, as it must have been at the moment of impact. What had he seen in that blinding instant? Bee shook the image from her head, rested her hand on her heart, which was beating out of control. Calm down, she told herself. Don't try to imagine. Don't go there.

Be here.

She stepped closer to the bed. She reached out tentatively and rested her hand lightly over Donovan's chest, let it glide down like a feather until it hovered over his heart. It was there, beating, a survivor in an earthquake buried under the rubble of his broken rib cage.

"I'm here, Turn," she said. "Can you hear me?"

Monitors beeped, the room buzzed, ticked, clicked. There was a screen with green calligraphy that said the same thing

over and over: you are alive, you are alive, you are alive. The intensivist had been less certain than the machine. Donovan was only barely alive. Unstable. Which meant she was allowed to be there, one of those good news/bad news things. The good news was she could stay as long as she wanted; the bad news was that might not be very long.

She sobbed involuntarily. Sniffed. Wiped her nose. *Get a grip, girl.*

“Turner, it’s Bee.”

Here was the medical rationale: because there was no guarantee he’d pull through, the benefits of having someone there with him—someone close—outweighed the distraction. And she was the only someone they could find so far. The cops were trying to track down Trish and Scott in the wilds of Algonquin Park. No, Scott isn’t his father, Bee had explained. So they were trying to track down his father, as well, who wasn’t answering his phone. Not a huge surprise. Until they found one parent or another, there was just Bee.

Bee and Turn.

Trish was his emergency contact number. The cop who had spoken to Bee had been scrolling through Donovan’s phone looking for someone with the same last name as Donovan. There were no Turners other than Trish in his contacts. So she’d explained how Donovan had dropped his father’s name, McGeary.

The cop scrolled to M. “Allen I. McGeary?” Bee had nodded. “Thanks.”

“Don’t be surprised if he doesn’t pick up,” she’d said before she could stop herself.

“What’s that?”

“Never mind.”

The cops had found Bee because of her text message to him, sent at 10:46, sitting in its little white balloon on Donovan’s cracked cell phone.

Where are you?

She looked at him, felt for him ever so gingerly through the thin cloth of the blanket. “Where are you?” she said.

The duty nurse’s name was Geraldine Ocampo. “Just Gerry is fine.” And then Just Gerry smiled. “He was calling for you, honey.”

“What?”

The night clerk had helped Bee out of her coat. She was out of breath and suddenly someone who had forgotten how to take off a coat. Then the clerk had handed Bee over to Just Gerry.

“Bee, right?” said Gerry. “It’s one of the things he keeps saying.”

“He can talk?”

Gerry wagged her head from side to side, not wanting to give the wrong impression. “Only sort of. Sounds. They come out of his mouth, and one of those sounds is you.”

Bee covered her face.

“You sure you want to do this, honey? It isn’t pretty.”

Bee recovered. Nodded. “Yes.”

Gerry smiled. “Reach out to him, okay? Just good stuff. Encourage him.” Then she guided Bee into the semidarkness of the ICU and left her there with a pat on the shoulder.

So Bee sat on a hard chair, by a bed that looked like it was designed by NASA, and although it wasn’t that cold, she

found herself shivering and wished that the night clerk hadn't taken her coat after all.

“Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . . Urrr . . .”

His cracked lips moved and sounds came out. Bee gently squeezed his hand—the right one, which was scratched but apparently not broken. The left was in a cast. So were his legs. He was so broken. She bent closer. The chair scraped the linoleum, letting out a squeal. She flinched. His face did not seem to register the intrusive noise.

“I'm here, Turn. It's me.”

Nothing. The slightest twist of his face, which quickly became a rictus of pain.

“I'm not going anywhere,” she said.

Nothing.

A web of tubes carried liquids to Donovan's battered body, carried liquids away. There was so much of him that was liquid now. He was a wineskin. His strong bones broken; his muscled arms and legs flaccid. She imagined what was left whole of him as a tiny figure on a raft, rising and falling on a dark and swollen sea in the cavern of his body.

She looked around the dim, small room—too small—with all its machinery and blinking lights. It felt like a space capsule. A floating world not of the earth anymore but suspended above it, held in the planet's gravitational pull. She wondered that there weren't straps to hold him tethered to the bed lest he float away.

“Hu . . . HUUUUUU . . . HUUUUN . . .”

She jerked in her chair. She had slipped away. She stroked his nearby hand.

Just Gerry had said to talk to him. Soothe. Comfort. Just Gerry was an optimist. She wore a little gold cross on a chain. A believer. Lucky her.

“Can you hear me, Donovan?”

His face contorted in a sudden paroxysm.

“It’s all right, Turn. You’re in good hands.”

Right.

The ventilator was not hooked up. No intubation, which is why he could make any kind of sound at all. They hadn’t shoved a tube down his throat through his vocal cords. “The doc who’s on tonight isn’t big on unnecessary extras,” Gerry had said. “The RT will be monitoring him.”

“RT?”

“The respiratory guy.”

So Turn was breathing all by himself, which was something. An important something. He might not walk again, but he could breathe. She tried to imagine Donovan content just to breathe. Donovan, who lived to move fast, to hurl himself at things: fly balls and flung Frisbees. Her family had once had a long-legged mutt; Donovan was like that. Just walking with him was a workout.

“Ah . . . Are . . . Are . . .”

His mouth curled in. His tongue appeared, attempting to lick his lips. On the bedside table there was a cup with water in it, and Q-tips. Bee took one and dipped it into the water, then gently brushed the wet Q-tip along his lips. It was something she’d done when Nana D’Amato was in the hospital. His whole face seemed to move toward the moisture with

the blind sense of a plant. Was it just her imagination? She dipped the Q-tip again and brought it to his lips.

“Are . . . you . . .”

She stopped, drew back the Q-tip.

“Am I what?”

“Are . . . you . . .”

“It’s me, Turn. What do you want to say?”

She waited, the Q-tip hanging in the air above his lips.

“See,” he said.

“See what?” She looked around as if there was something he needed, another blanket maybe.

She stared at him breathlessly. Nothing more came. Then she noticed his lips moving—hungering—and she gently dabbed them again with the Q-tip. Finally, his mouth closed. She put the Q-tip back in the cup of water and sat back on her chair, trembling.

There was so much she didn’t understand. What had he been doing on Wilton Crescent? He was supposed to be at his father’s and then join her at Bridgehead as soon as he could. But he’d gone home, for some reason, even though his mom and Scott were out of town. Maybe his big talk with his father had ended abruptly or had never gotten off the ground. She wouldn’t be surprised. She hadn’t wanted him to even try. She’d only ever met Al a couple of times but had loathed him immediately. She saw how he manipulated Turn. He tried it with her, too—tried to drag her into something. He spoke calculated words, sneaky words, words with barbs in them. She’d wanted Donovan to go see someone, professionally.

“Like your mother, for instance?”

“God, no.”

“But a shrink.”

They’d discussed—argued—what shape this help might take, but he was too independent, too determined. He’d solve this himself. “Listen,” he’d told her, taking both her hands in his. “If I start talking to a therapist about my relationship with my father, it might go on for a decade.”

And as far as he was concerned, that was that.

She leaned forward to look at him. How did he get himself run over fifteen yards from his own front door on a side street where you could count a typical evening’s traffic on one hand?

“Oh,” he said, startling her.

“Turn?”

“Oh.”

Was it an expression of surprise at some new pain? She leaned in close again, gripping the rail with both hands, watching his lips move as if searching for something in the air before he spoke again. “Dad,” he said. Or she thought it might be that; definitely there was a first *D*; she wasn’t sure about the second.

She leaned forward. “What is it, Turn?”

“Dad.”

“You want your father?”

His head quaked, like some kind of aftershock. She watched his face, willing his features to relax, the muscles to loosen.

“They’re trying to find your father, okay? He’ll come as soon as he can.” She only hoped that was true. It was Friday,

and Friday was pub night for Donovan's father. Well, any night was, really.

His hand suddenly flickered into life, as if he were playing a little arpeggio on the sheets. Then it lay perfectly still again. She patted it softly, softly.

"Dead," he said.

Dead. Or was it "Dad" again?

"What are you trying to say, Turner?"

There was no sign of recognition—nothing to suggest he heard her. She tentatively touched his face, tried to smooth out the worry lines on his forehead with her thumb. His face was the least damaged part of him. A livid bruise by his right eye and scratches from the bushes in which he'd landed. Then suddenly but slowly—achingly slowly—he lay his head in the cup of her hand, like a cat.

Did she imagine it?

"I love you," she whispered.

"Dead," he said. It was clear this time.

"No, you're not," she said. "We're at the General. You're safe now."

He seemed to respond. There was some kind of a feeble straining toward the words she was saying. And then his face moved away from her hand and he grew still. She removed her hand slowly from his face, sat back down, exhausted. She crossed her hands on her lap.

Her big black THEATER IS MY BAG bag was at her feet. She took out her phone and checked the time. It was in airplane mode so as not to mess with the high-tech equipment in the ICU. It was 2:30 a.m. She had phoned home from the lobby when she'd arrived to let her folks know where she was. She

would stay the night if she was allowed to. She would phone again in the morning. She would phone work as early as she could to tell them she wouldn't be in. There was nothing else she could do. She wasn't a person who took to sitting doing nothing very well.

She should go talk to someone, wake up Daisy or Jen. But the only person she really wanted to talk to was this boy lying here half-dead, on his back, hard against the side rail, as if he would hang on to it for dear life if his bandaged left hand could only grab hold.

She dropped the phone back into her purse.

"Are you . . ." he mumbled.

She waited. "What, Donovan?" Nothing. "Am I . . . ?"

"Are. You."

She didn't ask again. He mumbled on indecipherably. There might have been words in the susurrations and murmurs, but Bee felt too tired to unscramble meaning from the sounds. Disheartened, she took a tissue from a box on his bedside table and wiped a line of drool from the corner of his mouth. Then she sat back down and closed her eyes to listen better, to listen with her heart. She dove into her bag again and found some hand cream, squirted some into her palm, and started rubbing it in. Had to do something.

"K . . . t . . ." he said. "Kill . . . t . . ."

She stopped rubbing. Froze. "Turner?"

"Kill . . . t . . . im."

Bee rose slowly to her feet and, resting one hand on the rail of his bed, leaned closer to his face.

"What are you saying, Turn?"

"K . . . KILL . . . DIM!"

He had raised his voice and she was so shocked she fell back into her chair, which rocked precariously for a moment before she steadied it.

Donovan's face contorted again and his one free hand scrabbled at the sheets.

"Bee? Beeeeeee!"

"I'm right here. Shhhh. I won't leave."

"Din . . ." he said. "Din'n meee . . ." he said.

"Didn't mean to," she finished the sentence.

"No," he whispered back. "No . . . no . . . no . . ." he said. And then his body seemed to cave in from the exertion and he was still again—so still she wondered if he was gone—as if these words had been a deathbed confession. She looked up at his monitor: the green calligraphy said otherwise. The space capsule was still hurtling through space with a live cargo.

Bee collected herself. These are just sounds, she told herself. He's hallucinating. Who knew what kind of meds he was on? *I'm* hallucinating, she thought, on too much coffee and not enough sleep. She calmed herself down a bit. Came to a decision.

She reached way down into her purse for her journal and a pen. She was a stage manager. Stage managers kept track of things. When everybody else is losing their heads, they know exactly who has to go where and to carry which prop. She never went anywhere without her trusty Moleskine and a good pen. Her father liked to say that the world was in dire need of more stage managers.

She wrote down what she had heard, trying to remember the sequence: the question "Are you?" asked twice, "See"

something, “Dad” or “Dead”—one or the other, maybe both. She paused, looked at his face. He was motionless. Her eyes darted to his chest, waiting for it to rise, checking its movement against the monitor. Then she returned her attention to the page, but at first she couldn’t make herself write down what else he had said. Then she did. Had to.

“Killed,” he had said. “Killed him.” There was no denying how plaintively he had called her name—as if he were lost. As if she were not there at his bedside. And there was no denying the melancholy pitch to his voice in what had seemed like an apology: “Didn’t mean . . . Didn’t mean to.” Then she wrote a string of “No”s after it; she wasn’t sure how many he’d actually said.

She sat back, closed the journal on her finger. She would record anything that sounded like a word from here on in.

She sat and watched. She thought of a favorite song of his and hummed it, very quietly. “Carter and Cash.” Nothing. Gradually she felt herself go slack. She yawned, stretched, and settled. She drifted. She was in low earth orbit, a few hundred miles up, circling the globe, the seas and land masses slipping by down below if only there was a window in this tiny place to see them. She was lulled by the beeps and hum of the machinery that kept Donovan alive. She became a long, slim Buddha, sleeping upright on her chair.

When she awoke again it was to a hand on each shoulder. Just Gerry. “How you doing, Miss Beatrice?” She searched Bee’s eyes, full of questions, as if she were the patient.

“I’m fine,” she said.

Gerry gave her shoulders a squeeze and then turned to fuss with the IV tubing, the monitors and pumps, checked all

the bells and whistles. She stopped to look at Donovan, her hand on her chest. “He say anything?” she asked.

Bee slipped her finger out of the journal and closed it. “Sort of,” she said. “I couldn’t exactly tell. He did say my name.”

Gerry turned from her fussing. “Good,” she said, her brown eyes glowing in the semi-dark. She stepped back from her patient, rounded Bee’s chair, and picked up the clipboard at the end of his bed, on which she jotted some notes. Finished, she smiled again at Bee. “There’s someone here for you,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Bee gratefully.

Gerry chuckled. “No, girl. I mean there’s someone here to see you. Come.”

CHAPTER THREE

Donovan lay his weary body down, breathing hard, letting the adrenaline dissipate, sucking up the pain in his foot. He shouted his anger into the dead forest, one earsplitting cry punctuated by the only word that could hope to channel his misery, a word with sharp-edged consonants at either end and a painful groan in the middle. The shout echoed, enough to stop the frogs from peeping. And then into the dismal silence that followed his cry, the peeping critters returned.

He sat up, scrubbed the gravel out of his hair, off the back of his hoodie. He glanced back into the impenetrable darkness. That thing. It would have heard his shout. Was it even now turning back, coming for him, drawn zombielike to the sound of human suffering? His eyes could pick nothing out. It would be upon him before he knew it was there.

No, he told himself. He'd smell it first.

He clambered to his feet, stood there, his hands on his hips, his right leg taking the load of his body while the twinge died down in his left foot. He patted his pockets, felt his wallet in the left back, felt his cell phone in the right front. Thank God for small mercies. He pulled out his phone. No charge. Right. No way of calling anyone. He knew that already, although he'd forgotten. He had tried to call her. Call Bee. He remembered that now. He'd been standing in a downpour. Then running. There had been a lot of running. Running from his father's place, running home to Wilton Crescent. Which is where the fat man had picked him up. No. That couldn't be right. Too far. And why would he do it: hitch a ride to nowhere?

To here.

He fumbled in his hoodie pocket and found his charger cable. Well, that was something. Now, if he could just find a tree with an outlet . . .

That's all there was: trees and wet.

He hopped over toward the bank that descended to the deeper darkness of the forest floor. By starlight he made out the shimmer of water. Flooded land, spring loaded. He could only guess that it was the same on the other side of the road where the thing had gone. He looked over his shoulder: no shambling blanket creature. Nothing. So he was on a kind of isthmus through hell. Perfect.

He closed his eyes. "Beatrice?" he murmured, summoning up her name and sounding it out. He could almost feel her there. "Bee?" He listened hard and swore he heard her. Surely he did, as if she were just on the other side of the air.

He opened his eyes, stared hopelessly at the dull face of

his cell. Clicked it harder, hoping to see her face doing her *Mona Lisa* routine.

“Bee?” he said out loud. Then he shouted it. “Beeeeeee!”

He had traveled Highway Seven to a cottage when he was young. Years and years ago, when they had still been a family. Was it the first time he’d ever seen anything dead? He remembered the bloated carcass of a raccoon on the roadside, with three kits, stragglers, arrayed across the road behind their mama like good little raccoon children who had been reduced to crow snacks.

“Are they dead, Mommy?”

“They’re dead, Dono.”

“Welcome to the country,” said Dad.

There must be towns and villages, he thought. There were. He remembered one with a river running through it where they would go for groceries and the Dairy Queen and the library. But he wasn’t sure what good a town would be to him right now. He looked in his wallet. He had a couple of twenties and his emergency Visa card, which, the minute he used it, would reveal his location. Your son was here, Ms. Turner, purchasing a not-so-happy meal; here, getting a room in a squalid motel; here, buying a ticket to Timbuktu.

The fog rolled in, courtesy of the slow, wet wind. There’d been intermittent rain all evening. Donovan was damp with it. He took a deep breath, drinking the air. He closed his eyes. His shoulders fell. He reached up, felt the bruise left by the driver on his left arm. He took another breath, felt the ache in his bones. The fog had clammy hands.

He took a piss off the edge of the shoulder, arcing phosphorescent gold into the dead water below. Then he crouched, painfully, and sat on the lip of the hill, his legs trailing down the weedy slope. He looked into the murk of the swallowed land, even now turning silvery in the mist. He strained to see lights through the trees, a house, a farm. Anything. He closed his eyes and let the fog massage his temples. He remembered dancing with a girl in middle school whose hands were almost this wet.

Then his eyes popped open. A car. Had he heard it or seen it through the membrane of his eyelids? Lights, like Morse code through the trees—dot, dot, dot; dash, dash, dash; dot, dot, dot—heading his way, coming from the east. He was on a long, slow curve, but there was nothing slow about the speed of those approaching headlights. He hobbled back to his feet, grimacing with pain. Not every late-night driver could be a pervert.

He could hear it big time now, the engine revving high, like the driver was in nineteenth gear and looking for twenty. Donovan hopped to the edge of the pavement as the lights rounded the bend, deep center field away. He faltered, the pain in his foot excruciating. He doubled over, then threw himself up tall, his right arm flying out, his thumb pointing over his shoulder, as the high-beam headlights cut through the fog, barreling closer, blinding him.

The driver seemed to see him at the last minute; he corrected his wheel to pass as widely as possible, but he was going too fast. The car careened across the road, then squealed back into the right lane, weaving along the solid yellow lines until the driver corrected one too many times. The

car skidded on the pavement, spun out of control, and plummeted over the shoulder, tipping into darkness.

Flipping up

on end

and . . .

over.

A crash landing.

The engine howled and then stopped.

Donovan wasn't sure how long he stood there staring.

Did that just happen?

The headlights, still on, lit the pavement like a crosswalk. Donovan hobbled across the highway and along the shoulder with as much speed as he could manage. He stopped at the place he'd watched the zombie disappear over the lip of the shoulder. Some of the light from the crash spilled this far, but there was no body at the bottom of the slope lying facedown in the muck. He moved on and finally stood above the crash site, looking down on the car's underside, an obscene sight: all those body parts you were never intended to see. A white Camaro reduced to a turtle on its back, water halfway up the driver's side window. There was music churning out of the radio. Hard rock.

A fresh surge of adrenaline coursed through him. He slip-slided down the gravel embankment into the weed-choked verge. Then he splashed through the shallow water and, bending over, peered into the car.

The driver hung lifelessly from his seat belt, upside down, one hand still clutching the steering wheel, the other hanging limp, resting flat on the ceiling below him. The ceiling light

shone upward, giving the driver's face Halloween shadows. It was a little upside-down cocoon of a world of black pleather and winking lights and AC/DC.

The roofline was crumpled, deeply embedded in the mud. Donovan tried to open the driver's door but it was impossible. The other side was tipped up a bit, left to right, so he made his way around the humming, clicking hot body of the car. He was sopping to the knees now, slipping on the scree as he clambered back up the embankment around the front end of the car, then slid back down the other side. The top of the passenger door frame was free of the wet ground, the door unlocked. It took a two-armed effort, however, to open it, pushing mostly upward, heaving it open. Then he leaned into the cab of the car, trying to reach across the center console. He stepped on the upended roof's edge and the car began to tip toward him. He imagined the car falling on him, pinning his legs—submerging him under the black water. He jumped away and the car rocked back again. Settled. There was no way he could reach up to unlock the man's seat belt, but even if he did, what then? The man would drop like a sack—probably break his neck, if it wasn't already broken. Something was broken. The man was far too still. And looking at him, Donovan suddenly crumpled. He felt the pain of the crash surge through him. He doubled over, retched, but there was nothing in him to come out. He was empty.

He recovered, then leaned back into the car. He could reach the console. He stopped the music in the middle of a scorching guitar solo. The air filled again with the prehistoric sounds of night, modified only by hissing and popping, the death rattle of the flipped car.

He stared at the man, his knees pressed up against his chest, fetal in this metal womb. He tried to make the man breathe through a supreme mental effort. No luck.

The airbags hadn't deployed. He had no idea why not. Maybe this was the stretch of highway where nothing goes the way it should. Where fat perverts ditch you and a walking pile of blankets steps into the night and disappears and racing cars fly off into the trees and nothing is as it is meant to be. He watched the shadowy figure, grotesque in the dashboard light shining up into his limp and crumpled form, his grimacing face.

I've killed him, thought Donovan. All I have to do is stand by the side of the road, stick my thumb out, and people die. He hung his head and as he did, noticed a briefcase thrown up against the back corner of the ceiling, which was now the floor in this upside-down world. Water was trickling into the cab from the driver's side and was puddling, growing deeper, as the car settled. The briefcase sat in a pool of dank water. The ceiling light picked out details in gold. Donovan grasped the handle and lifted the briefcase out. Cracked from the impact, it fell open, and before he knew what was happening, stacks of money were falling into the oily black muck gathering in the car's interior. He slammed the top of the briefcase shut and lifted it clear. Then he stared back into the car. Several bundles of cash lay partially submerged, the bill on the top of every one a new hundred. The stacks were dense, perhaps two inches thick, wrapped in a mustard-colored currency strap.

Stacks of hundred-dollar bills.

Donovan gave in to shock. He stumbled backward until his heels hit the embankment, where he sank to his butt on the gravel. That's what gravity does, brings you down. Some ancient almost-man stood up some three million years ago to see if anything was coming, to see if there were fruit trees over yonder, maybe a stream, to check if there was a saber-toothed tiger looking for lunch. Gravity didn't like you standing. Gravity wanted to keep you in your place. But this almost-man all that time ago kept doing it anyway, standing up. Got into the habit. Gravity only laughed. Go on, stand up all you want, you'll fall eventually. You're mine.

Donovan hugged the broken briefcase to his chest. When he had caught his breath, he straightened the briefcase on his lap the right way up, the handle toward him. Slowly he opened it. There was nothing inside but money, two stacks deep, twelve stacks per layer, even though several of the stacks had fallen out into the car.

He managed to close the briefcase and lock it. Then he leaned his elbows on it and rested his head in his hands and stared out into the wet woodland. He closed his eyes again. Felt pain rake his body. Swore. Opened his eyes. The car's headlights suddenly went out. Gave up the ghost. He was in the dark again. Which is when he saw, dimmed by shadowy distance, a light, a light far across the other side of the forest.

He got to his feet, stepped down almost involuntarily into the mud, drawn to that distant light. In three steps the mud was up to his shin, just below his knee, but after three more steps it hadn't climbed much higher. The ground was soft on top but still mostly frozen, which was the cause of the

standing water. Soon he had splashed his way under cover of the woods, leafless but dressed in fog. It felt as if the fog were in him, in his lungs, his head.

It was then that he heard sirens. Turning, he saw lights far off coming west along the highway, moving at a clip. Cops or an ambulance? No one had passed by on the highway to phone in the accident. But maybe this was a highway where everything just happened all on its own. No cause and effect. Randomness. The opposite of hope.

He should give himself up. He tried to think how that would work.

“I surrender.”

“Why?”

“Because I did something bad. I’m not sure what.”

“Did you flip this car upside down?”

“No, sir. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“What’s in that briefcase?”

“Oh, right.”

Something in him resisted. These fog-enshrouded woods would shelter him. He would disappear, just like the other passenger in the Chevy did. And if by chance the water got deeper as he made his way farther into the bush toward that flickering and ghostly pale light, then he would walk deeper into it, weighed down by what he had stolen, until he drowned and saved everyone a whole lot of trouble.

He set off. The coldness of the midnight water numbed some of the pain in his leg. He slogged through the swamp, his chukkas sticking sometimes in the muck, squelching as he pulled them free, the ground not quite as frozen as he’d thought. By the time the cops arrived on the scene, he was