

The Monster at the Door

William K. Burke



As she studied the dark for any sign of the turnoff, Jaimie sensed something flutter, like a crow's wing flapping in the corner of her eye. She brushed off the little burst of fear. *It's nothing*, she thought. Just a natural reaction to darkness, to the world she moved through reduced to a tunnel of trees and a road rolling towards her in the headlights. Momentary anxiety. Perfectly natural when going to a place she did not really know, that she had only seen in the stylized pictures on the rental website that made each room look so long and wide and welcoming that you had to know the joy would never end if only you would click here to pay a small deposit.

"You're just being nervous," she said aloud, getting in the last word in an argument she was pretending not to have. Her phone still showed a solid blue line. She was on the right track. The red speck indicating her exit awaited just a bit ahead on the phone screen. Closer now. She slowed the car but saw only the implacable road and the unbroken barricade of tree trunks. Then she passed the magic point. The turnoff was behind her and her line glowed red. No reroute available, she had to turn around, alone in the dark. What had she missed?

Reroutes comforted Jaimie. They gave her the feeling of being contained in something wider and bigger than herself and the world it

could imagine, enclosed by some great mind that would bring her home no matter what false turns she might take. The blue line would shift and adjust but always be there. Its like walkabouts. Tribal people sending young people into the wilderness not to feel alone and unprotected, but to learn that wherever they went, the land itself held a message for them. That being part of the tribe meant more than safety, it meant that your life had meaning.

"Meaning," Jaimie uttered. "Meaning arises within social groups. It is a construct. Search for your meaning in our galleries. Find your meaning at the exhibit. No. No good. How about: 'The museum is more than a place for reflection. It is a repository of the possible meanings that let us see the world anew.' No. Ouch. Repository won't do it. It's like asking people to come look at dusty shelves. 'Experience North Shore Museum! Where great achievements spark New meanings in the heart of each visitor.'"

That "new," incorrectly capitalized, would reel them in; the new and the old, the tired and the eager. *No. Not enough. You've got to scare them a little. Make them think they are missing something if they aren't part of what you are selling. Come back to it later.* Jaimie braked her car to a stop in a welcoming spot beside the road at the bottom of a small hill. A pair of headlights glowed beyond the crest of the hill. Too bright for a car. A tractor trailer breached the rise and swept down the hill roaring like a wind unleashed from a mountain fastness. Red lights glowed in the car's mirror.

"The North Shore Museum: where the past lights up your future." Maybe. I mean who isn't scared about their future? After her U-turn, the line on her phone screen turned safely blue, leading her again to the magic point where another line ran into what, in the real world, was nothing but dark, seamless woods.

"Fuck you Gerry!" *That felt good. Let it out.* She had a couple books and three days' worth of cheese, wine and frozen dinners bagged safely in the back seat. Gerry could have Etta. He could slip her pearls off her neck and slide the strap of her black shift over her shoulder and they could... Well they just could. *I am away from it all. For the time that stretches in front of me, none of that matters.*

Birch Grove Lane. There it is. The sign was only visible coming from this direction and the road was only a dark patch until you saw the sign. The kind of place that you were supposed to have been before if you want to find your way around, or else it's just pay your dues by being lost and scared. The dirt road to the cabin was splattered with wide, deep holes that she could not always swerve around. Every time the car bottomed out, gravel and rocks scraped on metal and she feared the car's innards would burst into leaks and leave her stranded in the dark. She heard her mother's voice: "You can't do that, boys do, but not my girl. Alone in the woods like that." So helpful. She managed to dodge two holes, then hit one so steep that she was lifted off the seat

of the car and thrown back down by the seat belt. *That had to have snapped an axle or something!* But the car rolled on, the road eased and she came into a clearing where the cottage leered at her like a great gray toadstool glowing faintly in thin moonlight. The windows were dark evil eyes and the doorway a mouth pursed in disgust.

“What am I doing?!”

You have to keep yourself safe. That’s what her mother always said. Or had said once and now the words were stuck in Jaimie’s mind forever. The words of every parent to every child before they sent them forth. The words every child ignores as soon as they get out of sight, though maybe all that is done now, maybe children will not be wandering off in the future, but will instead be tethered the way we will all be tethered. *Somebody*, if only a sort of disembodied intelligence, will always know exactly where you are. We started out terrified of all-powerful and unknowable gods, had a few hundred years of imagining we were in charge and now we are scuttling back into the cave. We are not enough, we tell ourselves, let something else think for us. If endlessly shuffling and reshuffling bits of information can be called thinking. Well, there’s a lot of energy going into convincing us that is all we are, a bunch of facts. The faster they can be retrieved the more powerful they become. Look at me. Our species’ parting gift.

Jaimie closed her eyes and cupped her hands into a confessional to hide her face. Go ahead. Imagine you are above it all. *Non-serviam* and all that. When writing grants, the lifeblood and cash source of her current existence, she found she wrote more clearly and with sharper distinction if she allowed herself just a cook’s pinch of disgust for the blood-soaked fortunes seeking to evade taxes by doing good works—the very essence of the nonprofit sector. Knowing you are part of a charade gives your heart permission to shut down while your mind gets on with saying what you have to say the way you have to say it.

“Etta is so brave,” Gerry had remarked. Etta with the pearls and the collection of vintage black shifts she wore above oh so tight jeans. All any man could see when he looked at Etta was her sleek sweep of buttock and shy curve of breast and *don’t tell me you don’t know what men think of when they see a string of pearls hanging against a comely and partly bare chest.* Gerry thought Etta was “so brave” because her poems, and they *are* rather good poems, bared her heart to the world. He could not see that was Etta’s great trick: honesty in art from a woman who would always play a role. Her honesty was a game she was playing in one arena to throw everyone off her trail. *At least, that is what I think and I am going to go on thinking it. I’ll probably buy her poems when they come out.* “The grace you saw in me was the shadow of what I threw away.”

Good luck, Gerry. Good riddance. He thinks I hide myself. Well, if I do it’s because I learned my lesson the hard way.

Forest darkness surrounded the leering gray structure. Jaimie gathered her bags, punched in the door code and stormed into the house ready to make a simple weekend out of it. *Fuck my fearfulness.* The Fenmore Trust draft had almost come together. It would go out before Tuesday’s deadline. *Keep busy. Keep the karma flowing while you wait for the big ones*—the two, sometimes three, grants a year that meant they could keep the museum open. Time to get out there and start having drinks with her contacts. Her world was working. She would stream some shows and snack and nap and walk in the woods on a nice, sunny afternoon. She hit the switch of the living room light and threw her bags on the floor.

“Fauuuuuuuck!” The scream brought her to her knees. She had loved Gerry. She had pictured their life resolved, put together, circumscribed by deep comfort and relentless peace. They would know what they were getting every day, on and on together into a future that had seemed enough. Until it wasn’t. Not for him. You convinced yourself the easy comfort you felt together was the rock to build a life upon. He thought you had clad his feet in concrete and carted him to the edge of an endlessly deep lake called marriage. It was a problem of mismatched metaphors. Jaimie thought about her grandmother. Just an image, a few frames’ worth of a flashback to a stout woman with a chicken tucked in the crook of an elbow while her other hand grasped an axe as she strode toward an old stump at the edge of her farmyard. A summer of her youth spent running across the pastures. Getting hungry when she saw Grandma grab a chicken.

“Up and at me. Have a look around,” the house seemed to say. *This is your weekend getaway.* A green braided area rug spread under a metal and glass coffee table could have fetched a high price at a vintage store on the right corner of a neighborhood on the way up. A lavishly stained, brownish, maroonish sofa waited; its redeeming feature was a various blankets and sheets that could be piled high when she sat down to watch movies on her laptop. *Just an old house.* The kitchen had a floor of yellow and white checkered linoleum peeling at the edges. The kitchen walls had been painted with glossy cream enamel. A set of keys hung beside the window over the sink.

She could not look out that window. As a child, she had read an illustrated book of ghost stories. One full page drawing showed a young girl in a farmhouse washing dishes while a face—only a face—traced in white lines in the dark, looked in a kitchen window at her. The girl was intent on the pot she was scrubbing. She had not looked

up yet. "She would always be about to look up," was the first line of the second poem in Jaimie's senior thesis project. *Charming but derivative*, the panel said. Merely "passing." Her last therapist had ever so gently suggested her father would be there when she finally looked up. Fuck her and fuck the imaginary Dad who lurked in her therapist's mind. Real Dad had moved to California to make final his statement that Jaimie was not worth his trouble. The keys glittered in the kitchen light. A dark something waited in the backyard. A utility shed. The door that led to the lake path opened from the kitchen. Jaimie paused there and never, for even a second, considered walking down that path. The light from her phone showed only a wider, deeper darkness. She thanked her mind for not being able to imagine what was scaring her, but that didn't mean she wasn't scared.

At the end of the hall, a main bedroom was furnished in "basic-chic," with some lavender-colored flowers fading on the wallpaper and a double window looking out onto the forest shadows. Along the hall, there was a bathroom and a kids' bedroom with bunk beds along one wall and a single bed alone in a corner underneath a print of a sailboat with a crack in the lower left corner of the frame. "Stop that!" An older sibling would have told the twins when the print crashed to the floor. "Do you see what you have done?"

"It's perfectly awful." Jaimie told her mother over the phone.

"Just what you wanted?"

"A good place to feel sad."

"Why are you letting..."

"We've had that discussion. This is for me. About me. Not about what he did to me."

"You just deserve so much better."

Mother. Would it kill you to have one original thought? You say that every time we have this conversation and it really is a backhanded way to criticize me. You say I deserve better, but I chose him. So what you are saying by not saying it is that I cannot trust my own choices and am therefore no more advanced than when you used to carry me to my crib and read me my night-night stories. As she always did, Jaimie thought through this rant in the time it took to lower her phone to her lap and take two long, slow breaths.

"I know," Jaimie replied. You don't tell the funders they are blood-soaked hypocrites and you don't give Mom your deep perspective on your mutually deficient internalized emotional dynamics. That's just the way it works on this planet.

"I knew he was false the first time you brought him around."

"I guess you saw more than I did. I just sort of succumbed to his charms."

"Do you need anything? I can transfer some money."

"I'm fine, Mom. Job. Apartment. Twenty-seven."

"Well, it wasn't so long ago..."

"I'm fine. I need to go. I just wanted to let you know I made it."

"Okay then. Lock up tight. You hear things about girls on their own."

"I'll call you tomorrow afternoon. I need to settle in and relax a

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bit. It was a long drive."

After their goodbyes, Jaimie spread a blanket on the couch, pulled some food out of her overnight bag and made a plate of cheese and crackers to eat on the couch while she watched some episodes of nurses gazing longingly at doctors and doctors gazing longingly at each other while Jaimie briefly fantasized about writing a spec script in which the hard-souled administrator undid her tightly-wound bronze and gold-streaked hair when overwhelmed by sudden and unexpected desire for a young man working a janitorial gig as part of a program finding jobs for people experiencing mild to moderate disabilities. It was only a kiss, but complications would ensue.

She left the plate with crumbs on the table and snapped her laptop shut. The house felt solid and safe around her. The forest would become her ally in brooding. She could think. She could see herself

anew. This was a good choice. She was being a bit of a nervous Nellie, but that was not a problem, necessarily. It just was.

That last phrase hung languid and seductive in her mind. Vines of sleep wound up her spine and let their leaves cloak her worries. *Remind myself not to write down any thoughts this weekend. Let Gerry, and the twisted version of myself I created to accommodate his view of the world, flow down an endless river and vanish over a distant waterfall.* For no reason she bothered to name, Jaimie lay down in the kids' bedroom, on what she was now calling the "big sister bed." Her phone was sixty percent charged, so her last thought before placing it on the bedside table and wrapping a comforter around herself was that she would have to charge it first thing in the morning.

She awoke in the dark and she did not know why. She did not have to pee. She heard no sound. There was one thing that was different. A wide and cool draft, a breeze really, teased her cheeks. She thought to check the time but her fingers' probing could not locate the flat, solid comfort of her phone on the bedside table.

"Damn it's dark." She was trying to reassure herself with the simple and obvious. She stood at the head of the bed while her sleep fog cleared. She had dreamed again that she was late for a morning class and had not studied and there was no hope for it. What about this draft? She turned on the light in the room and noticed that she must have only thought about putting her phone there. It must be in the living room, on the table in front of the couch.

She made her way to the living room, skirting the edge of the coffee table, congratulating herself on so quickly adapting to her surroundings and thus giving herself a few seconds not to think about this soft, cold wind or what it could mean if she had misplaced her phone. The cold grew stronger as she crossed the room. When had she opened a window? Had it been too warm on the couch? There. That. Explain that. No draft. The front door of the cabin stood wide open. That was the problem. Someone might be in the cabin. That was another sort of problem. Another category altogether.

"No. Stop it. Calm down." This little lecture placated her thoughts enough to notice that her hands were shaking and her heart had glued itself way up in her throat, which had gone dry as a bone in the sun. She shut and locked the door. Alone at last. That was what the monsters, the monsters in human form, said when they had the victim all to themselves in the movies. *Oh post! What would Grandma say? The devil with all this foolishness. Of course Grandma would say it with an axe in her hand.* Maybe there was something like that, something exactly like that, a nice one-handed axe recently sharpened, waiting in the little shed outside. Like there was any chance in the world she was going to go outside and

walk to that shed, open it with the utility keys. No chance she was going to do that. She turned on the light in the kitchen, then turned it off again. Light was not her friend. With the lights on, she could not see out the windows in the kitchen. But anyone who was out there could see in. And if there was someone out there, they had the keys to the utility shed. The keys that had been hanging beside the kitchen sink when she made her first inspection.

It did not surprise her, though it did ice her arteries, when she understood her phone was completely gone. *Okay. Lots of thinking, but come on. Misremembering some keys. Leaving an unfamiliar door slightly ajar. The phone is probably in the couch cushions like that time at Lanae's apartment. Don't make this more than it is. A funny story to tell over coffee or drinks. Oh I scared myself! You were terrified, girl! Thought you would get away from all this for a little weepy time.* She stood at the edge of the living room and listened.

Noise outside. Dark shapes that she hoped were not, but clearly were, people...at least three of them. They had stepped out of the woods into the clearing around the cabin. Headlights turned the corner on the gravel road. For a moment, she was outside her body, watching her eyes go wide and her face freeze like a thousand victims in a thousand stories.

"What do you do, Jaimie?"

Words heard through the door of the bathroom where Jaimie had locked herself. She had seen herself flee and fallen back into her body as she slammed and locked the bathroom door, and pulled out the tiny night-light from the socket beside the mirror. As if that made any bit of sense, as if trapping herself in the deeper darkness of this room with its solitary frosted window would save her, would keep her alive, would perhaps let her transport her body to another place and another time.

"Jaimie. You need to answer me. For your own sake."

The front door had crashed open. She had heard that. And steps trampled down the hall and spread through the house. From outside came the sound of her car window being smashed. They were taking everything. Like she had anything.

"Jaimie, tell me. We have to start somewhere."

How the fuck does he know my name? Purse, silly. And car registration. And every damn piece of paper that followed her around and, and, and credit. She had credit. All that care, all that minding her own business and keeping balances low and avoiding interest payments.

She remembered looking at her credit card statement and thinking that if she had a time machine, she could have used it to buy her grandmother's farm. That was what they would steal. Well, fine. White-collar crime. New-collar crime. Remote-work-from-home crime. They would not want to mess with her person. This guy was just here to keep an eye on her. It was going to be alright.

"Jaimie. Tell me. We have to start somewhere."

"You don't tell the funders they are blood-soaked hypocrites and you don't give Mom your deep perspective on your mutually deficient internalized emotional dynamics. That's just the way it works on this planet."

Jaimie felt her hands shaking. Trust your body, they say. Right. They say that in yoga classes with candles burning and soft music and time for a nap after a gentle workout. She drew a breath to top the right. One more to still the left. Sit down, stand up, swirl yourself around. Kid rhymes.

"It's okay, Jaimie. I'm a good person. I know that will be hard for you to believe. But I am. I dedicated my life to kindness. I'm only here to make the world a better place. Sorry we met this way. It's just that it is too late to sit back and hope that everything will correct itself. That all the natter and 'this side' and 'that side' and 'on the other hand' will add up to some sort of plan and we can all live life happily along into some future that makes sense. It's time to take action. But you are going to be alright. I'm a kind man. Really. We used to wait outside the pig slaughtering factory. Stop the trucks and give those little

pigs a drink of water, a pet on the nose. Just a moment of kindness in this world. You know, in the scale of infinity, all finite values are equal. Really. In proportion. That's calculus. As the value of any measurable system approaches infinity, the proportion of the whole of any discrete amount approaches zero. So one little tiny moment of kindness in a life of being penned and hit and kicked and then stunned and slit and strung up matters. It's a flapping of butterfly wings. So just relax. Everything will be alright. I know I said that before and it sounds like I am repeating myself so it will be true, but I am repeating myself because I know it is true."

"I'm a development assistant. For a nonprofit."

"Good. Good. You do good work. Of course, you know you are only helping sustain the myth."

"The myth?"

"That the machine cares. That we are more than cattle waiting for the day we walk the ramp."

Fuck. Jaimie thought. Fuck, fuck, fuck. A sociopath. A fucking Unabomber. I was really hoping this was a gang of kids.

"Mostly I write letters and make phone calls."

"Are you good at it?"

"I suppose I am."

"So you get a reasonable return for your efforts."

"Most of the time."

"That's good. Mind if I ask who you work for?"

What the hell, Jaimie thought. Her breathing had settled. Just a conversation to kill time. Later, back home, she would tell a story. She would fill out a police report and call her credit card company. It would be a hassle. Just something to work through.

"I work for the North Shore Museum."

"Aha! So a lady of the arts. I like that."

"Some art. A small permanent collection. A gallery for regional artists. Lately we've been moving into explorative anthropology and indigenous history." *Breathe. Just Breathe.*

"I'm glad you do good work. People get so much wrong. I used to. For so long I thought it was all about the animals. You know what we do to them. Everybody does. We just pretend not to. And we do it to ourselves. All the time. Just line up over here. If you please. Only one way to stop it all. That's what I understood at the end. You got to take your power. Turning from your power is like killing a baby. You know, nursing unacted desires and all that. Living in resentment without taking action. Don't be one of the fools living in your little house, the place allotted to you, and telling yourself everything is fine

because you had your usual breakfast and are ready to order your next coffee. Somebody or something always has to die. We get to lie about that because we have people to do the killing for us. Everything is built on a pile of bones. Always has been, always will be. I learned that. They taught me that when I was sent away. The ones who know how to organize win. They take what they want."

"What do you want?"

"Just an hour or so. That's all. An hour."

"You can leave me alone. I'm fine in here."

"That's not how it works."

The tone of his last rant, the way his words seemed to spill out like they were mere substitutes for impulses barely bottled up, had scared Jaimie. Her breathing had speeded up.

Jaimie forced a breath down to her belly and let it leak out her nose. She saw a dark shape that could be her face in the mirror. Slow your breath. A class. A former police officer talking to a roomful of teenage girls. *You are prey. Remember that, but don't let it shut you down. Your mind. Your breathing. Your muscles. Those you can control. Be like a cat. Cats are both predators and prey. Curiosity and wariness. Keep breathing. It will keep you from losing your mind, best chance to keep you alive. Talk if they want to talk. When it comes down to it, go for a shin with the edge of your shoe. And wear hard-soled shoes. The edge of a wooden sole on the edge of a shin bone is a disabling pain. If they have you from behind, it's right there. If they are trying to grab you from the front, fake for their crotch and they will cover up by presenting you a nice clean open shin. Be ready to fight.* She felt a power in her soul. Or her belly. *Just keep quiet and wait.*

"Yes. I thought it was enough to do something right and good. No matter how small. Those little pigs feeling our fingers on their snouts. That was going to save us. Save something. We thought. Then this truck driver ran over Sally, who was blocking the truck. Squashed her right there in front of us. And that bastard laughed like he knew he was going to get away with it. But I had something to say about his future. You know that. It took a batch of police officers to get me off him. A few of them got something to help them remember me. All the bruises they could want and at least one broken arm. That truck driver was going to be in the market for a new face. So I went to prison. I learned a lot there. Oh boy yes. They got stuff to teach you in prison. Help you see the world in a different light, as it were. I learned all I needed to know about what kindness gets you in this life."

That grab bar in the shower looked cheap enough. Jaimie tugged on one end. Yes. She could pull it loose. Not much heft, but the edges would be sharp and uneven. He had broken the first rule of the psychotic asshole trade union. Given her time to think.

It stayed quiet for a while. The rummaging sounds of her meager life being ransacked had died down. Maybe this was almost over. Steps. He was coming back.

"Mickle. Is that a Jew name?"

Oh double F. Oh god. For the first time Jaimie thought about the miles of woods gathered around the cabin.

"Jaimie? You have to answer."

"No. I don't."

"Well. It don't hardly matter to me. Me. I like the Jews. Got to admire how they came back. I mean we still got to finish the job. But we got a lot of jobs to finish. Just some things got to be done, you know. It's nature's way. Got to have a culling every now and then. I can hear you thinking. That's smart. Take my measure. Just relax. Last week we cleaned out a whole family in forty-five minutes. I heard the mom telling her kids stories through the bedroom door."

"It's alright. I understand. Just take what you need."

"What are you up here hiding from? What did you do?"

"What? Nothing"

"What baby did you kill?"

Don't answer that. Let him talk. Jaimie grabbed the shower bar and held on, the cheap metal cold against her palm, the air frigid against her skin. Her cold heart waited in her chest.

"Oh yes. Don't try to hide. It's the dream. The worst dream. We all have it. We did or thought something so awful, something so bad that the only way to get rid of it is to show it to ourselves in a dream so we can wake up and shake it off. I used to dream I killed my baby brother, gutted him like a hog. I'd wake up sweaty as a clam, sneak from my bed and crawl down the hall. He'd be sleeping in his little crib, just as pink-faced and happy as could be. I had that dream for years until I learned what it meant. That was in prison. You learn stuff there. Now I dream about killing those that deserve killing."

"Do you always look people up to get an audience?" Jaimie's belly lurched at her own words. *Really? Showing anger?*

"Don't think you can know me. Don't make that mistake."

If she ever got the chance to tell this story to a detective, Jaimie would say it was that moment, the iced tone in that last syllable of mistake, that told her he had killed before and would have no trouble killing her. He was probably looking forward to it. Her arms ached where she held the bar. Not yet. The angrier he was coming through that door, the better her chance. *That's right asshole. I read Sun Tzu.*

"You don't want to hurt me," Jaimie said.

"What makes you say that?"

"I meant it as advice."

"Oh, so you are giving me advice now?"

"Yes. You think some back-country DA has time to bring in a digital forensic person to trace who benefited from my stolen credit cards? Now assault. That goes right to the top of the pile." The grab bar moved in its footings when she gave it a gentle tug. Quiet. And into that quiet Jaimie launched herself. She was tired. That would be her explanation.

"So come on through that door. Your asshole life will be over."

The coo of a night bird filled the quiet. Cold, slippery metal against her palms. Footsteps in the cabin. Muttering voices.

"You know what is the biggest lie of all?" he asked through the door. Back again. Always something to explain. "Kindness."

Blood really does feel like an icy liquid in your veins when you are terrified, Jaimie thought. Like falling off the deck of the *Titanic*. *God, I loved that movie. Is anybody going to come for me?* As she watched her thoughts growing a bit too random, Jaimie shut them down by calculating her chances. *He told me a story about himself that, if true, would let me find out his name in about thirty seconds at a computer. Unless I never get to sit at a computer again.*

"What do you mean?" Jaimie probed.

"I wish sometimes I had a brother. Mine don't want no never no more to do with me. I miss him. I miss having one person I could tell the complete truth. Just whatever came into my mind and I never needed to check to see did he understand. He'd lived the same damn things I did."

"Are you going to leave me here?"

"I had a girl once where it was kind of like that. We had only known each other a short bit of time but it seemed like we were making up the same stuff as we went along. We went along together for a good long while. But they take everything when you go to prison. Everything. I have not eaten tuna fish in six years."

He let silence settle in. There were no more sounds from the cabin. Just the wind through the forest and the night birds with their soft songs like she was stuck in a poem mourning her own life.

"That's the only decent food you get. Tuna fish and crackers that you buy in the commissary. After a while, you don't even notice that you're eating it. Just kind of notice the habit of eating, right down to scooping the crumbs in your palm and licking your own skin to capture them all. You don't want ants to find you when you're in prison."

This time, the silence only lasted a beat.

"I just got to say I'm sorry for this. I like to think we might have gotten along if we met differently, you know, as to time and place. You

seem like a good listener."

That was the last thing he said before he kicked the door in. He had practiced. The doorknob shuddered and the wood crunched and almost splintered. By his third kick, when the door flew open, Jaimie had the grab bar poised over her right shoulder, the jagged edge aimed right for the spot below his cheek where the big artery bulged in his neck. If she told this story to the one person waiting in her future that could make her feel safe, she would note that she had guessed his height exactly right; it must have been the angle of his goddamned voice through the door. She swung and felt the metal sink home. She twisted her wrist when the edge of her weapon sank in. He grabbed for her bar. That put him off balance. She let go of the bar and shoved hard into his ribs. Then she was out the door and in the hall. At one end of the hall was the kitchen and at the other was the main bedroom. She could see the windows to the woods waiting. The rest of her life was a chance taken on a guess. It always had been. Her first steps toward freedom had been waiting since she learned to run.