

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The Seventh Day in hell was certainly a pivotal day of the Exodus and life altering for Timmy Gardens. He journeyed with a staggered step through the long dark wooded forest, far away from reality and Remy's cabin. He followed the eye of the moon and the Moonlight music and her voice—something that had left him, because Exodus meant leaving behind the past—that beckoned and cursed him in a bitter ensemble. The owner of that voice would be waiting for him in hell—his hell—in a fiery, scarlet dress.

He traveled into the endless woods until he entered the thick presence of the black smog that hung in the air like the rancid stench of the dead. Swooping buzzards with bad intentions swooped and swerved from above, hawks with an eerie hue of verdant eyes shadowed in the sky, fat, ugly crows with jet black feathers cawed in a raspy discouragement overhead, and the mutated vultures with softball size heads covered with thick lines of blood vessels and ready to spear down, waited amidst the long outstretched arms of the trees in deadly anticipation. Timmy Garden's body was dampened with pasty sweat, although he shivered from the nippy chill. He was deathly aware of all these creatures. He reached for the shape of metal in his breast pocket—the heart of the matter—and was bitten by a creature with vulpine quickness.

“Ouh! Dammit. Shit on a stick!” He cried. And gave another yelp when the fat white mouse with red eyes and yellowed jagged teeth as sharp as razor blades scurried out of the inner pocket and crawled down his sprawled out body. He rose in a sitting position next to a brown and yellow stained cot. Must have peed myself last night, he thought and

remembered Remy saying it would more than likely happen and in his case, ““don’t be surprised if you shit your pants”” He said through pinched lips. But now that conversation seemed a world’s away now. His world wavered and rocked as if he was out at sea. His surroundings came to him dizzy and fast. In front of him was a small, bathroom mirror hung on a cement wall and smudged with gritty fingerprints. To his left was a rusty brown toilet bowl that was overflowed with stringy intestines and purple and bluish bruised guts and hunks of meat. He raised a fist to strike the devilish mouse that bit him, but it was gone. He closed his eyes from the fuming heat that bordered him. His head ached, and a load of puke somersaulted in his gut, his mouth was as dry as volcanic sand.

*“Life living hell...”* A soft voice spoke from somewhere.

“Shit” he grunted and looked at the vile bowl of innards. The words echoed in his pounding head. He was disoriented, and those words didn’t help the cause. They stung and made him hang his head in humiliation and shame.

*“You made...”* The woman’s voice faded before it could finish.

He scrambled to his feet and spun around to catch who was at his back. What he found scared him to death. He blinked his sleepy vision into focus and fought the nausea that continued to dance and do cartwheels. But it was a lost cause. When realized he was in some kind of cage, a prison cell, his stomach curled and kinked. His balls were sucked into his stomach from fear and he was so petrified that it made his shriveled Johnson itch with an annoying pain. He coughed from the heavy clouds of charred smoke that hung at neck level. He looked from his dirt covered bare feet to the prison bars. This is real, he thought and gooseflesh bubbled on his arms. The nape of his neck and back of his head

felt like they had been stuck with pins and needles. He walked to the cell bars. Something was wrong. What the hell were the bars—

And that's when he barfed. Black muddy liquid like oil and grease came shooting out three times. And at the same time he heaved over to heave out vomit he had a wet fart squirt from the opposite end. His throat jerked another two times before he could stand up straight. Beads of sweat raced down his forehead. He grabbed a handful of brown, dead leaves on the ground and cleaned his accident. The foliage of makeshift toilet paper crinkled and cracked as he wiped his crack and he could feel some of the splinters of dead leaves glued in the crevice of his ass. But it got the job done. *This is how low I've become* he asked himself and tossed the clump of waste to the side. He placed a hand on his stomach trying to soothe the pain.

Bones...

Human—

“Hey, Slick calm down man. It gonna' be al—

He was taken over by the absence; the unquenchable thirst.

In the dark woods where the dome of trees swayed back and forth from the violent wind, blackness enveloped him and the voice was erased by darkness.

He was out of the woods and had somehow traveled back into the giant birdcage once again. He must have lost his way at some point. When he took a step closer and grasped one of the white crooked bars, his stomach quivered and readied to blow again. It was

made from a long leg and a small skeleton arm of a young child; tied together by a string of bent and twisted teeth. He wasn't sure if they belong to any humans or not and if they did it was a family of cavemen that didn't have good dental insurance. He screamed and vehemently shook the bar, but it wouldn't budge. He ran along the skeleton bars and came to the center where a lock with the face of a dragon engraved in the middle. A chain linked with eyeballs met the lock and held the prison bars together. Timmy shook the bones with ferocious rage but to no avail. The dried up eyeballs rattled and clinked against the cage like loose change in a pocket but didn't budge. He gave up and stared at his hands while letting out another wide mouth yell. Then he looked beyond the boney bars and his legs began to shake with fear when he noticed that more than just pitch-blackness was outside his prison cell. In the far off distant, gigantic volcanic mountains spewed and bubbled fiery rivers of thick hot lava.

Where the hell am I...? Timothy wondered with a fear-stricken mind.

In the middle of the horizon of the monstrous volcanoes was a black skyscraper tower of volcanic mountain and from it a rushing waterfall of molten hot lava spurted from the apex. Timothy Gardens looked out at a barren desert. He could see miles and miles of an endless gray sand wasteland. Ashen rain fell in a misty drizzle from the dark ebony sky.

“...my life living hell.”

Something crawled over his barefoot at the same time he heard the woman's soft voice. He checked behind him and once again saw nothing. Then he made the mistake of glancing down at his feet. A tiny black piglet was sniffing his gritty toes. Rodents and bugs he couldn't do but a little piggy wasn't so bad. He crouched down to pick the little guy up but before he could, the baby swine cocked its head at him and squealed a raspy

oink. The baby pig had a child's malformed face. A gooey ivory film covered the pig-child's face. Its crooked eyes stared cross-eyed and its deformed nose hung way too far to the right. Timmy tried to scream but was sucked dry of breath when the mutated piglet-thing smiled with a mouth full of squirmy maggots and stale dead flies. The swine started to snicker like a witch that turned into a mocking, evil cackle. From each deep-socketed eyes came two long brown slugs with gray antenna eyes. The creepy critters fell to the dirt floor and began burrowing between the crevices of his toes.

I'm in hell! That's where I am. In hell!

He ran for the filthy sheeted cot but tripped over the dead carcass of his cousin Rex.

Timothy Gardens jolted up from a living nightmare screaming at the tops of his lungs. He instantly went for his breast pocket—the heart of the matter—but was stopped by his dead cousin. Rex helped him sit up.

“How the hell are you talk...?” But he was exhausted and out of breath.

A flicker of light came from dead Rex's hand.

“Slick I'm here.”

This is another dream Timmy told himself and could hear muffled words. They were different from the mysterious woman's, the beckoning voice of the night. He tried to make out his cousin's face, but his vision was cloudy and unfocused. His body began to spasm in a paroxysm of madness from the lost. Heat flushed over his face and sweat leaked from his forehead. In his thirty-two years of life, he had never felt so sick and many of those years he had been sick. Sweat and puke were something of the norm for

Gards, but this was a hellish sickness. I'm still dreaming Timmy begged himself to believe and went to reach for his heart again but was stopped by the dead man once more.

Rex tried to ease the convulsing body and had to relight a match.

“Shhh-shhh, you're so close.” He tried whisper an encouragement through pursed lips, but Tim was till ranting about hell and the woman and swinging solid, lean arms at his torso. At the same time a brown moth with yellow ripples of yellow on its spine the size of a beverage coaster flew into the incandescence glow the firelight and... Rex died, his neck twisted to an impossible angle and snapped off and—

Pale haired monkeys with stomachs that were lined with bloodshot inflamed, and carbonated skin with green pulsing veins that fizzed from the inside, jumped and danced outside his prison of hell. Timmy saw one fat monkey grinned at another smaller monkey with vermilion teeth the size of rose thorns. Then its face began to twist and swirl as of it was made of creamy liquid and its facial features contorted and became disfigured like smashed Silly Putty. Timmy gawked with lips shaped in a big O, and they cracked from dryness when he opened his mouth. His hands buzzed and the compulsion to lick his lips began to eat at him. He was so thirsty... so tenaciously thirsty. He felt drunk and knew he couldn't be sober when the fleshy, white face of dough turned into a clown mask. He squinted and realized that this was no mask. The primate had grown a human head and an older man with clown makeup on had somehow taken over the monkey's body. The hideous clown-monkey—the ringer leader of the barbaric gang—tipped Timothy a wink from an eye with red dripping makeup that stopped at a white painted cheek and drawn

into a set of three red tears. The Ring Leader smiled with a mouthful of tiny spikes, spat out a long purple tongue that stretched and grew as it unrolled from the dark hole.

*(Why do you have to be the Ring Leader at all the parties?)*

*(Just be with me, am I not enough?)*

The woman's pleading voice faded away again, this time from the chambers of his troubled mind. Timmy barely heard them anyway (things didn't change much in hell) he was too spellbound by the bizarre monkey-man.

Timmy watched as the slimy tongue fluttered through the boney bars and in front of his face. The clown licked his lips and growled in an openmouthed slur, "thits bwell packe duh pane ahway" The tongue slithered to the heart of the matter and poked at his chest like a fat ugly finger. Then it rolled back up and was sucked back in with snake-like speed. The ugly clown offered Timmy Gards another spiteful wink, then began throwing its long arms in the air and chanting "ooh-ooh eee-eee aah-aah-aah" and bit into one of his comrade's throat. Three or four other monkeys instantly jumped on the murdered primate and they all fought for the taste of blood. The rest of the savage primates shook and rattled the skeleton cage and grinned with those needle sharp rodent teeth.

Timothy Gardens was back in hell. He stared dumbfounded at the barbaric clan of monkeys from his cot. His nude body vibrated with fear and pain. He felt a mental and—more strongly—a physical loss.

*For her...? Or for...*

His shivering body couldn't get warm. He shook his head violently from side to side trying to focus on the moon behind plum colored clouds. He was feverously thirsty and

just wanted a drink. He went to ask Rex for a drink but remembered two things: Rex wouldn't give him a drink and well, Rex was dead. He closed his eyes and drifted. Thirsty, I'm so, *so* fucking thirsty, he thought, "Just one drink" He bargained with himself.

But hell doesn't offer any drinks to the thirsty. Exodus means he has to *leave* the drinks behind. No more for him. I'll be thirsty for the rest of my life, he told himself. There was no one else to tell. Kate had left him and Rex was dead. He looked from the blurry shape of the moon to the carcass of his cousin, the world blurred and quivered in the split second between each view.

He swam in and out of hell, from the scorching heat to the chilly woods. One moment the giant beast of looming oaks with foundations as thick as boulders held his obscured sight. Then the raging, monstrous mountains of hell captured his vision through the lines of jagged human bones. He caught sight of an opened knapsack over packed with clothes and supplies. *I need a drink*. Then came the disturbing gut filled toilet bowl only now—for the split second it came into view—slithering snakes of all different colors hissed—hiss at him—and slithered inside the brown crusted bowl. *Just one*. His throat felt like sandpaper and he could feel the scorching heat closing the airways of his throat. *Choking*, he thought. "I'm choking! Rex! Kate! I'm choking dammit! Somebody help me, please! I can't do this." And at that moment he remembered something that forced him to ask, "Please Rex wake up and let me—

Darkness consumed him. When he woke up, he was in lying in the small cot inside the confines of a bone cage. His throat was on fire. He rubbed his eyes awake and



massaged his sore throat then ran a tanned hand through his tangled greaser pompadour. Strands of his slicked—he suddenly remembered Rex calling for him: Hey “Slick”—back hair fell in front of his eyes, the tips of gelled locks dripping with the sweat of fear and sickness. He thought of Rex and why he was a big part of the reason he had ended up in hell. But when his vision came to focus he saw her and the scarlet dress.

*Christmas... You'll look like a majestic cherub ma'dear*

The floodgates were breached. The tears came.

*“You made my life living hell”* a soft weeping voice spoke both far and near.

But in hell—especially on the seventh day—tears aren't allowed, they are a lost cause. The Exodus is for leaving the tears behind. And he quickly realized this uncompassionate mandate when the bittersweet tears turned into an army of red fire ants and he was thrust back to the fiery depths of hell. Gards could feel the bugs skittering tiny legs march down his exposed flesh. He began to convulse, his pulse rapidly palpating, when the brigade of fire ants reached his inner thigh and crotch area. They came to a halt. And he heard the cherub voice. Singing to a slow tune but it was much too far away to be recognized. The distraction didn't last long and the first bite sent stinging pain up his side and to his head. Then another bite, and another, and another, and then some more. As they bit tiny hunks of his flesh from his leg they dropped dead to the dirt floor, each little body making a *Plit* sound. Timothy Gardens attempted to swat and squash the attack of bugs but his vision was too blurred. His head felt dizzy from an unquenchable thirst and his head ached with pain. He screamed from fear and frustration and of course pain. It was like a thousand miniature needles being stabbed into his leg. *Life living hell*, he thought and cried as he continued to fail at smacking the little red devils off his crotch.

But no matter how much he fought he made no defense against the red demons. Some reached his stomach and chomped down with their atomic fangs. He fell on his back and was quickly covered by a red blanket that stung. He twisted and turned, swiping at his invaders from the soil of hell. He thrashed and screamed and cried like a child. But in hell no one can help you but yourself. His face was being assaulted, and he knew he would meet darkness soon. He stopped fighting because he welcomed the blackness now, also he knew that; at the heart of the matter it could all go away. As if it was just one sip away. But he fought hard not to give in.

Another world away—behind a wall he himself had built and constructed for many years; a foundation built on poison—the lady in the scarlet dress sang.

Outside of hell—a long ways away from the Exodus—she wept in fear that'll he'd never come back. The addiction to poison was too strong and like his father he'd be left to live in hell until he became a permanent resident.

Darkness and hot pain veiled his thoughts and mind. His throat itched as if it was sunburnt from inside and his mouth was a wall of sheetrock.

“What the hell Slick?” But it was useless trying to help clean the dirt off the writhing body. Slick threw punches and kicked his hiking boots as a child having a temper tantrum. Rex took a step back and watched the man dry heave violently onto the knapsack. A mean, ball of fire was just waking up off the horizon of green-haired giants.

Timmy woke up staring at the enormous eye of the devil. It watched him in hopes of failure, in dark desires of failing the Exodus Treatment. The dead body had tried to

strangle him, but he was able to fight it off. Then he started puking up things inside the snake bowl of shit that had no right being inside him. Here a set of car keys with her picture on a tiny key chain, then a glittering ring, next came a set of handcuffs, the second arm loop got clogged in his throat and he began to gag like a pig with a slit throat, before he was finally able to upchuck it. And last was a—

That's when he saw the face... a child's face that belonged to a little boy, no older than two, was set inside the filthy mouth of the toilet bowl. That's my child, he thought, that's my little boy, Dear God! The eyes opened and their gaze fell on Timothy like a heavy ebony anvil. Timmy jerked back when he saw the cataract in each dead eye. *This is the son I never had.... the son I'll never have.*

*"Not until you stop Tim! If you can't take care of yourself how can I raise a child with you!"* Her voice again hit his ears like a haymaker.

The child's dead pale face was swollen like a slaughtered fish head and covered with sores and sunken purple craters. Timmy cautiously leaned his head back from the rim of the bowl and—

"Shit!" He barked and wiped the spit off his face. The dead child's head grinned and showed vampire fangs in its cunning grin.

"Just one sip daddy'o," The little brat said and offered Gards a sinister wink. Timmy watched as it reached up with a mummified hand and flushed the toilet. Its head spun and smiled mockingly. And before it disappeared down the hole—the head got wedged for a split second before the dark murky water forced it down the drain—it said, "Welcome to hell bitch." in a wicked cackle.

“No, no, no, no, NO!” He protested against the dead child’s curse and fell back onto his rump. His throat still burned like the slag of burnt metal. His head was spinning from nausea and a moment later he collapsed onto his back.

The sun had peaked and the eighth day had begun. His body shivered from the crisp morning air. He was somewhere between the dark shadow of slumber and wakefulness when his hand came across the heart of the matter. He felt the shape and thought of Kate. He also thought of the familiarity of his grasp. The gun belonged to his good friend Jimmy B. that he had met back in high school after his father passed away in the trucking accident. He drifted back into hell. And—

—stared at himself in the mirror. He noticed that he was no longer naked and must have gotten clothes at some point during his travels back in the hell of the giant bone-cage. He reached for the heart of the matter in the inside pocket of his red flannel jacket—his favorite jacket that Kate had gotten him the same year he surprised her with his mother’s cherry oak acoustic Baldwin. He also observed dismally, that behind him, above the raging waterfall of molten lava that glowed neon blue, and made explosions as it hit the plungpool and kicked up violent obsidian steam cyclones, was the great big crimson eye of the devil watching him with evil expectation. The aluminum felt right in his hand and he looked from his implausible—unwashed and unshaved—reflection to Jimmy B’s gun. The weapon felt *so* right in his hand and with one pull, *just one sip daddy’o*, it could all be over. The thirst *and* the pain but most of all the *lost* could be forgotten. He studied the face in the mirror. It was a face he didn’t much like and rather

hated in fact. A face that had driven everything and everyone he loved away. Even Rexy will be driven away after the failed attempt at Exodus. And as he went to hang his head in surrender he caught an unlikely picture. His face was replaced with another one he didn't much care for; the face of his intoxicated father came to him along with a wind of chills like claws skidding down his spine. Then his brother David paid him a visit erasing the angry bastard's. David, who was still missing overseas for what...? Ten years now shook his head at him in disappointment, combat helmet and war paint to boot. The lost army soldier vanished and his best friend Tommy "Mack" Winthers who got his nickname because he was build as solid as a Mack Truck and had died in a drunk driving accident—ironically enough involving a big old Mack Truck on the PA turnpike—that Timothy Gardens witnessed first hand

*(My hands)*

and knew all too well about.

*But with just one pull... one sip it could all go away.*

The slow and steady pace of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata was being composed and struck a deep, sensitive cord in Timmy's mind, deleting the haunting past and gloomy reminiscence. He blinked his eyes to clear his sight but what he saw was no trick of the eye. Diesel Mack had faded away along with the rest his ghost and he was stuck with his own reflection (perhaps scariest of all) once more; head tilted back, the tip of the barrel just inside the black aperture of his dry, aching mouth. But then he found that if he moved his head the slightest degree the woman in the scarlet dress appeared seated at her piano. He tilted his head back the other way and his own ghastly, beard stubble image reappeared. He slanted his head and there was the pianist, turned back again and his

defeated features with the mouth of the gun kissing the edge of his lower lip—ready to be fired and he'd fall back into

*(life living hell)*

hell—came into view. The mirror reminded him of those holographic cups you get at movie theaters sometimes, the ones they have when a new superhero movie comes out.

A bad prognostic seeped into his mind. He took a step back from the smudged and stained tainted mirror. He couldn't stand looking at himself and he found that when he stepped back all he saw was her, his Kate. The scarlet dress blazed in the cone of saffron light amidst the darkness that surrounded her like a giant flashlight beam.

Now Timothy Gardens switched views from the metal in his hand—the heart of the matter—to his lost love that had left him because of the heart of the matter. Because he made her life living hell and for that he had been cast into a hell, and unless he succeeded in the Exodus Treatment he would live down here in this fiery prison for the rest of his miserable life. He looked from the flask to his bride, gazing at both with deep lust. He had never been so damn thirsty. Tears were knocking at the lids of his eyes. He didn't dare break his focus from his wife anymore. He tilted the tip of the gun named Jimmy B, to his mouth once more and stared at his wife.

The soft eerie tone and saddening music sent chills down his back. It was Kate's favorite song. Blasts of erupting volcanoes fired and raged in the distant. Red and purple lightning continued to blaze the raven sky overhead. But the only sound that could be heard was the beautiful dynamics of the music. Kate used to play it on the piano. And he surprised her with the fancy red dress because "A pretty thang like you can't play the keys without a slick lookin' dress ma'dear." He remember telling her.

He stared into the mirror and could hear singing along with the music. “I love you, Kate... But I’m so thirsty baby.” He thought of her creamy skin and suddenly could smell coconut, “your skin is like creamy coconut”, and he remembered kissing and nipping at her neck while she played the keys on nights where the fire didn’t blaze from hell but from the comfort of their living room—*their living room, dammit to hell!*

But then a moment later at the climax of the song the woman in the scarlet dress froze her fingers. She’s weeping, Gards concluded dismally. His bride spun in her sit and he waited in a quenching desperation. He gasped at what was revealed to him. The woman’s face had been erased showing nothing but a membrane of pale flesh like tight fabric. He gaped at this and then a second later her auburn hair turned into flames and sizzled away. He was losing her in a hell he had crafted from his never satisfying thirst and a past he couldn’t let go of.

*Exodus means leaving Slick*, the ghost of Rexy’s voice added.

Gards was at the “crossroad of crisis” as Rex said he would be. And on the eight day, here it arrived meeting him literally face to face.

*Just one sip...*

He tilted—

Timothy Gardens woke up from a dream in the isolated woods of his hometown in Mount Arlington. The Exodus was doing its magic. For Rex, it came on the third night now five years ago. But Timothy Gardens had already entered into a nightmare of living hell. Rex’s cabin was back north near the edge of Lake Hopatcong, which was a day and a half hike away. It was the eighth day in hell for Gardens, and hopefully the last night of the Exodus Treatment. Rex convinced his brother-in-law Remy two years ago to enter

Exodus and now the pot-bellied mountain of flesh swears that he and Terry haven't been happier and the kids are all doing well.

But for Timothy Gardens it was too late. Kate had already left him. She was living with her parents down in Manasquan and from what his sister told him she was doing well. And unless there was a life changing experience for her husband he would be left alone in his own constructed hell.

In fact, it seemed as if everyone was doing real swell. But Timmy Gards had entered hell—it was of his own doing and he knew it was what he deserved for putting her through it too.

Rex observed and tried to stay out of the way while the delusions and hallucinations came, they could be pretty wild and violent especially for a raging, chronic alcoholic like Gards who was basically kicked out of AA. But by the third night the Delirium Tremens started to become dangerous and Rex had to step in sometimes. The fourth night had Timmy sweating like a leaky faucet and at one point during the night he started oinking like a pig. On the fifth night, Rex almost let his cousin take a sip because he began strangling himself while screaming how thirsty he was and something about a monkey and a clown. But Rex stopped him. And then during the afternoon of the sixth day in hell Rex was positive that Slick was going to rip off his manhood as he screamed about a sidewinder attacking while he was trying to take a leak in his knapsack. He knew how important this was for Timothy and how much he loved Kate and wanted to win her back. So Rex stayed back and watched over his cousin, even changed his pants twice after one piss accident and one shit accident. Slick had to defeat hell, and that's what Exodus is all about, leaving your demons behind and finding the Promise Land.



Rex watched from about ten feet in back of Timothy. “The crossroad of crisis.” He whispered softly.

—the aluminum flask of Jim Beam whiskey back. Timothy Gardens stood near the cliff’s ledge across from the beautiful streaming waterfall. His last image while still in hell was of the scarlet dress transformed into scorching embers and consuming his love.

*Just one sip...*

He tilted the heart of the matter back—just a tad more would do the trick—and emptied the whiskey of fire.

“I’m leaving, for you Kate.” He whispered behind sealed, trembling lips that yearned for a kiss of love more than the lust of a drink.

And the heart of the matter was washed away to hell by the rushing water down below.