

PAPERBACK

The wind was blowing steadily its thrust hardened by occasional gusting. Mother Nature's hot, dry breath churned up all matter of debris lending substance to myriad dust devils sashaying to and fro down Center Street.

It was Saturday so traffic was ordinarily absent in Ashberg. The occasional auto or pedestrian were usually headed to or from Danny's B&G, located just a half block off Center Street on First. It was thee hot spot in town. It was thee only spot in town. Anybody who was anybody in Ashberg, as well as those that were nobody but secretly longed to be somebody, made it a point of showing their face at least twice a week at Danny's B&G.

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Directly across the street from Danny's stood a weather-aged structure that had not seen a coat of paint in two decades. It might have been a sea mist green at one time, but it was difficult to tell. Years of blowing dust had left it a mottled stucco. In not a few places the sand and cement had relinquished their grip revealing the brick underpinnings. And finally the architecture was brought together under the auspicious yet austere banner of the Burlington Trailways Transportation Company.

A large plate glass window gave waiting passengers and the solitary ticket agent a view of First St. and the dubious comings and goings of Danny's B&G patrons. On the sidewalk directly beneath this window sat a concrete bench, its weight and design intended to discourage theft or tomfoolery, and promote the products and services of John

Mandell's Farmers Insurance Agency. Aside from providing respite and posterior support for the multitudes whose bottoms had graced the bench over the years, that's all it did, except for one thing. It was a portal.

Nestled snugly beneath the bench, wedged up against one of its feet was the tattered remnant of a book, a paperback book. The front cover had been torn away long ago and most if not all of the pages, whatever number remained, were stained and dog-eared. To the casual observer it did not deserve a second glance for it only added to the accumulation of trash that called this desolate and darkened space home. To the more discerning and curious, it drew one to it. This it had done countless times and would undoubtedly continue to do so for its mere existence was proof that what it contained had defied the ages.

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Jacob Greer "Jocko" as he was known around town sat quietly in the cool pungent darkness that enveloped all of those who patronized Danny's B&G. A half empty rock glass sat before him with a diluted mixture of gin and tonic melting the remaining ice cubes. According to the number of stir sticks splayed out on the bar he was working on his fourth drink, the benefits or consequences of which had not yet taken effect. The cigarette that had been burning in the ashtray had exhausted itself and the filter was now on the bar pointing towards the ceiling. It remained connected to its residual ash by some invisible filament. When Jocko felt so moved he would add the butt to the collection that was deepening within the confines of the dull, black Bakelite receptacle.

Jocko was depressed. His live-in girl friend of three years was messin' around on him or at least he suspected as much. She was rumored to have bedded his best friend

Randy Krankowski. Oh yeah, as if it made much difference, everyone in town just called him “Kranky.” Who would have guessed, right?

Anyway, like I was saying Jocko was depressed and he was using this opportunity to ponder his options. He felt the need to exercise some type of revenge, but he questioned whether or not he was willing to commit that most permanent of solutions, and he was unsure at whom he was most angry. He wondered to himself which of these two scoundrels would best serve his need for retribution, and was he truly willing to suffer any of the possible consequences that may be imposed upon him as a result of his actions. He swirled the drink around in his glass, polished off the remainder in a single swig, motioned the bartender for a refill, and arose from his stool to visit the john.

While Jacob Greer was handling himself within the confines of the single stall, inhaling the naphthalene soaked Sani-Cake suspended from the rim of the toilet bowl, Randy Krankowski, Jocko’s good buddy and back-stabber sauntered into Danny’s B&G unaware that his future nemesis was soon to greet him. Randy selected a vacant stool midway down the bar, and with the customary wave summoning Eddy, the handsome, wind-blown bartender he ordered his usual rum and *Coke*.

Meanwhile, back in the john Jocko shook off, performed a pelvic retraction, and zipped up. With his usual barroom aplomb, he depressed the flush handle with one of his feet, checked his hair in the spider webbed mirror, neglected to wash his hands and welcomed to his sweaty palm the current strain of flu virus that was residing on the brass door handle as he exited the men’s room.

The hallway that led into the bar was just a shade darker than the lounge itself. This allowed him to spot Randy Krankowski’s form hunched at the bar before Randy

spotted him. He took two steps backwards letting the darkness envelop him. He needed a moment to ponder his next move, but the rack of pool cues hanging on an opposite wall provided him with his answer. Summing up a little courage by reminding himself of Randy's treachery, he emerged from the hall and tried to cover the fifteen foot distance as unobtrusively as possible. He kept an eye on Kranky as his fingers discovered and grasped the first stick they encountered. It was a relatively true thirty-two ounce Brunswick.

Jocko dislodged the cue from the rack and transferred it to his right hand, letting it hang to his side. He took a deep breath, exhaled and with much determination and little wisdom, he strode toward the man who had once been his closest friend. He succeeded in approaching Kranky without drawing his attention and when he was no more than two paces from his target, he brought the stick up and with all of the momentum that he could muster, brought the implement crashing down soundly upon the crown of Kranky's skull.

The cue stick broke in two casting splinters astray as it cart wheeled down the bar. Kranky collapsed onto his rum and Coke before sliding off the barstool. Whatever damage that was done to his head could have only been compounded when it bounced off the brass foot rail.

The four patrons that were scattered throughout Danny's and Eddy the handsome, wind blown bartender stood aghast as Jocko looked around the room. No one moved for a brief moment then Eddy stepped up and over the bar as if he were leaping a fence.

"What the hell is wrong with you Jock?" He yelled, grabbing the remnant of the cue stick from Jocko's hand.

“The sumbitch has been bangin’ Sally and he aint gonna be bangin’ her no’s more.” Jocko uttered softly. He turned away from Eddy, walked down to where he had been sitting, grabbed his cigarettes and left Danny’s B&G.

Eddy knelt down besides Kranky, saw that he was bleeding profusely and screamed. “Somebody call a friggin’ ambulance.”

Since the closest one was based in Corvis, the county seat about thirty miles distant, it would be awhile before it arrived. There was no telling if a representative of the local constabulary would bother showing. Brawls at Danny’s were a common occurrence, and were usually settled on site or broken up by patrons as long as there were considerably more of them than there were pugilists.

Eddy tried coaxing some response out of Kranky but his attempts were futile. He wasn’t at all sure but he thought that maybe Kranky had checked out for good. He muttered some religious phrases under his breath, then remembering his basic first aid training, decided that it would be best to leave Kranky where he was; just in case there was some spinal injury that could be compounded if he were to be moved prematurely. The flow of blood from the gash atop Kranky’s skull had ceased. Eddy didn’t think that this was a good sign, but there was nothing much that he could do, so he just stayed close and waited with resignation.

Jocko looked at his watch. He noted that it was getting close to two in the afternoon and the bus to Caswell would be arriving shortly. It would be a quick and easy exit, and even if the cops did show up he would have more than enough time to confound them. Old Josh Satterly, the local deputy didn’t have the sense that God gave a crowbar so outsmarting the law was not a monumental task.

He looked both ways before crossing then stepped off the curb. A gust of wind caught him and almost spun him around, but the alcohol coursing through his system had been countered by the adrenalin of killing a man so he still had his balance. He made it across First St., ducked into the bus depot, threw a twenty across the counter at the unrecognizable face that greeted him, and with ticket in hand went back outside and planted his ass on the concrete bus bench still promoting the services of John Mandell's Farmer's Insurance Agency.

Based on his calculations assisted by the schedule posted over the ticket counter, he had about thirty minutes before the bus arrived. That would correspond with the arrival of any emergency vehicle, and since the bus stopped only long enough to allow passengers to embark or disembark, he would be well on his way out of town before it was determined that Jacob Greer, AKA "Jocko," had exited stage left.

Confident of his situation, he withdrew the red and white box of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, along with his Zippo proudly displaying the Marine Corps insignia. After a couple of persistent gusts of wind he was able to strike a flame and ignite the fine tobacco blend that made Marlboro the number one seller in the world. A deep draw permeated his lungs with an assortment of righteous chemicals, and it made him feel so much better. As he bent over resting his elbows on his knees, he wished that he had the opportunity to deliver the same level of retribution upon Sally which that 'mofo' Randy had received.

"Oh well." He muttered to himself. "Perhaps another place, another time."

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a brand new, unread paperback nestled in amongst the trash that had accumulated around the base

of the bench upon which he sat. He reached down and retrieved the book, slapping it against his calf to dislodge the light film of dust clouding the cover which was very simple in its presentation, yet commanding. It was all black except for the gold baroque lettering that boldly spelled out “The Portal.” Curiously, there was no evidence of an author. He opened it looking for the usual small print references of publisher, Library of Congress number, ISBN number. This standard litany was absent in any form.

Jocko continued to turn the pages until he came upon the dedication page. Having just taken a drag off his Marlboro, his only reaction to the print that he saw was a violent exhale accentuated with a coughing spasm that would make any observer consider the possibility that this man was about to discharge a lung or both. It read:

This Book Is Dedicated To

Randy Krankowski

A Wonderful Friend and I Miss You

Jocko wiped the spittle and phlegm dangling from his lower lip on the sleeve of his shirt as he tried to gather his wits about him. He glanced again at the letters that formed the words that formed a message that was incomprehensible. He looked across the street to Danny’s B&G. There was no increase in activity. He heard no approaching sirens. No one had come out of the establishment looking for him. Nothing! He turned a couple of pages to one enumerated as Chapter 1. In font and print size typical of paperback publication the first paragraph started with his name. Continuing on, the story unfolded beginning with the first sound that he made when he was delivered forth from his mother’s womb thirty-one years before. Picking out phrases and snippets of

information that he either remembered or that jogged his memory, he turned the pages slowly at first, then with greater haste as his life flashed in front of him.

His hands were beginning to shake, so badly that his half-smoked cigarette dropped to the sidewalk, and was whisked away by a gust of wind. Small beads of perspiration were beginning to form along the hairline that was slowly receding and had been for the past five years. He reached up and wiped his brow with the same sleeve that had blotted the drool only moments before. He continued to thumb through the book, recognizing each and every minute of his life as it was laid out on the pages passing before his eyes. Curiosity was turning to fear.

Jocko turned and looked over his shoulder through the plate glass window at the clock that was suspended above the ticket counter. Judging by the time, his bus should be pulling up anytime now. He wiped his brow again, this time with his other sleeve. His eyes returned to reading or perhaps more appropriately, browsing. He was approaching what he thought would be the end of the book, when he was stopped by a particular paragraph that outlined the phone call that he had received from his sister the day before; the call that had initiated his downward spiral; the call that made him aware that Randy Krankowski, his friend since boyhood was possibly or probably boffing [sic] his girlfriend of almost three years; the call that would end Randy Krankowski's life

The soft sough of air brakes setting grabbed his attention. He looked up to the presence of a large coach with no discernible markings on it and the motion of the passenger door opening and the driver dressed in gray exiting. Jocko wasn't sure but he sensed that the driver was dead. His pallor was not dissimilar to the gray of his uniform, and although his eyes were covered with Eisenhower sunglasses there was no motion in

the muscles of his face as he called out the departure for Caswell and points south. Jocko pondered this momentarily for he was unaware of any points south for this bus. He had ridden it many times and it had always terminated in Caswell for the return trip to Ashberg and points north.

He set the book down beside him and rose retrieving the ticket from his other shirt pocket. Covering the brief width of sidewalk in a couple of steps, he handed the coupon to the driver, who extracted a velum copy, punched the cancelation, and returned it to him in abject silence.

Jocko stepped aboard, ascending two steps before reaching the aisle. There was only a smattering of passengers scattered about the rows of seats leaving him a plethora of choices for his traveling pleasure. He noticed that two of the passengers had chosen seats on each side and toward the front while another, unidentifiable because of a baseball cap pulled down over his or her face sat way to the rear, directly across from what he surmised was the restroom. Choosing a midpoint he moved towards a desirable row moving his arms as if he was walking through deep water, tapping the backs of seats as he went. An elderly woman with her hands folded in her lap sat on one side of the coach and a much younger woman gazing blissfully out the window on the opposite side neither acknowledged his presence or even glanced at him as he passed. He turned into a row about midway down the aisle on the left side, ducking and twisting as he slid into the window seat. This allowed him to observe the comings and goings across the street at Danny's for whatever time was left before departure.

Only moments passed before Jocko's peripheral vision caught the driver coming back aboard. He stopped only briefly to cast a cursory glance down the length and width

of the bus before taking his place behind the wheel. Jocko heard the door slam shut causing him to look over the seat backs in front of him. There in a large rear view mirror were the shaded eyes of the driver looking right at him, displaying what only could be characterized as a snarling grin. It caused a shiver to course down his spine as he returned his focus to the now distancing bar and grill that had up until perhaps thirty minutes ago, been like a second home. He unknowingly would never set foot in Danny's again. Looking back one last time, he could see the flashing beacons of an ambulance and patrol car pull up in front, the attendants and deputy hastily exiting their respective vehicles to confront their next tragedy.

Settling in for what he expected would be a two hour ride, he depressed the release on the arm rest allowing the seat back to recline. The alcohol he had ingested, combined with the stress of perhaps killing his best friend, and the gentle rock of the bus took its toll, and sleep swiftly overtook him. His dreams became his reality. He continued to feel the sway of the bus, the gentle motion interrupted periodically by a bump in the road. But, the landscape that he was familiar with, the pinion pines, mixed with purple sage and the occasional oak or acacia were absent. Instead, the ground was arid and black. There were only the skeletal remains of unknown plants and shrubs and wisps of fog or smoke wound its way over the terrain, weaving its fingers through barren stems and branches. There was no sunlight, only varying shades of gray provided ambient light. It was a fiendish doom, and it permeated even the transport that he rode in, which was not the same as he departed Ashberg in.

“What the hell?” He gasped before he turned to confront the person or whatever it was that was sitting next to him. Abject fear deterred any movement that he

contemplated. He tried closing his eyes to rid himself of this sense of desolation, but they were already closed. He stared out into the gloom that whizzed by. Now the ground that had exhibited such emptiness before was changing. It was becoming pockmarked with mounds and depressions of undulating masses; masses of humanity, their limbs flailing, their faces distorted with agony and fear. Figures unrecognizable in the shadows, moved between these tormented souls, seemingly indifferent to their agony.

Jacob Greer was by now sweating profusely. Outside of the coach as it barreled down the road light had diminished to blackness; a thick, velvety, used-oil blackness. Only erupting glows of red and orange perforated the darkness, and they all seemed to be far in the distance. They never lasted long enough to discern images or activity. The only source of candescence shimmered from the front of the bus or whatever this vehicle was; from what might have been the dashboard. But, Jocko was afraid to turn too much to his right for he sensed a malignant presence, and he was not prepared to confront it yet. He continued to stare, through closed eyelids, out the window into darkness.

Fear driven tremors were beginning to radiate down his arms and legs. He didn't pay much attention to them but they were noticeable and resulted from concluding that he wasn't headed towards Caswell. He squeezed his eyes shut as tight as his eyelids would allow, took one deep breath, and then with vision cleared, he turned to his right. There sat - none other - than his best friend Mr. Randy Krankowski, drooling blood from blackened lips forming a grin wider than his former love interest, a Ms. Sally Donovan to be sure, could spread those long silky legs of hers. But then 'Kranky' probably new that as well if not better than he did.

“Watch yaws doin’ partner?” Emanated from Randy’s mouth along with the most fetid putrescence imaginable. Just when Jocko thought that his sanity could stand no more, a trickle of maggots, mixed with the blood and phlegm, ushered forth.

“Welcome to my world, asshole!”

Jacob Greer could feel his heart pounding against his sternum. He knew that in moments it would escape from his chest. He began to sob uncontrollably. He didn’t know whether to grab his chest or cover his face.

“Oh Krank, I’m so sorry for what I’s did to ya, but I’s thought that you and Sally was, you know, gittin’ it on. Guess I was wrong, huh?” Jocko pleaded.

“Oh no, Jock. You was right. I’s been havin’ my way wit Miss Sally all along. She was just puttin’ ups wit you for da free drinks.” Kranky croaked and gurgled as he said these words. He turned his head enough so Jocko could feast his eyes on the thick end of the pool cue that was nestled in the crevice of his skull. It was the part that had not spun off down the bar. “In fact I’s had just left her before comin’ into Danny’s. Unfortunate’s for her, she chose to git’s on my bad side this mornin’ so I had to do’s to her what I’s about to do to you.”

Randy Krankowski allowed his tongue to loll from his mouth before licking up the blood and larvae that continued to cascade. Without warning his right hand swung across and plunged into the chest of one Jacob Greer, A.K.A. Jocko. He withdrew his hand in a jerking motion, and contained within his grasp was Jocko’s throbbing heart. In seconds, Jocko knew that death was upon him, but no sooner did life leave him than something other than life returned. All of a sudden, he was comfortable with his

surroundings. Kranky didn't look so threatening. They both sat back and began to laugh. Maybe hell wasn't going to be so bad after all. It was as if their friendship had never died

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The clock hanging above the ticket agent read 2:32 P.M. A large bus pulled up in front of the weather worn building that at one time might have been a sea mist green but the wind and the blowing sand had taken their toll and its coloration was that of a mottled stucco. In not a few places the sand and cement had relinquished their grip revealing the brick underpinnings. This was the town of Ashberg's bus depot, and the architecture was brought together under the auspicious yet austere banner of the "Burlington Trailways Transportation Company." The door of the bus opened and a young driver stepped out hailing to those that might care that the 2:30 Express to Caswell was now boarding. While he waited for any passengers who might be embarking to appear, his eyes caught a glimpse of the accumulated refuse beneath the bench that still promoted the services of John Mandell's Farmers Insurance Agency. He noticed, nestled snugly beneath the bench, the tattered remnants of a book, its cover missing, the pages stained and dog-eared. However, he was not discerning or curious. He was just a casual observer and it was just a "PAPERBACK."