

Part I

1.

Andy Weichert stood alone on the moonlit New Jersey state road at 2:00 A.M. just as he had two years ago. The permanently scarred pine trees just off the shoulder offered the only obvious traces of the accident. If he stepped further into the woods, searched the shrubs, weeds, and sandy soil around the pines and hollies, he would probably find pieces of car, maybe worse. He shone his Mag-Lite in that direction, trying to catch a glint of metal or glass but only saw the glowing eyes of a watchful raccoon in the distance.

He looked down and made an arc with the flashlight, trying to paint the skid marks back onto the pavement. Something wasn't right, though. He walked across the highway and turned on the lights on his state cruiser. The blue and red lights flashed, an intermittent strobe in between them. His eyes had long grown used to the same lights that would pain the eyes of a civilian. He returned to the spot, imagined the skid marks leading off the road and into the trees. He looked up.

They'd been heading toward the beach from town, and yet they'd ended up in the woods on the other side of the road, almost facing the direction they'd come from. What had made them swerve? What had made them cut across both lanes of road and into the woods? They hadn't been drinking or using drugs, but the reaction seemed so dramatic, not the slamming of brakes for a stilled animal, but a swerve to avoid

something bigger. Yet, investigators had found no evidence of another car, and none had passed until 1:30 that night, calling it in when they reached town. He should have been back on patrol, but he'd lingered at Slim's All-Nite Diner longer than he should have, not wanting to leave the sight or the attention of Samantha, the waitress, the victims' daughter.

Andy rubbed the back of his neck. A truck rumbled past on the highway, and the blue lights from Andy's cruiser flickered on the short, gnarled trees. South Jersey didn't have inviting fairy-tale forests. It had glorified swampland in sandy soil. It would be hard to imagine elves and pixies living here, but the Creature From the Black Lagoon, a short Big Foot, Indian ghosts would feel right at home. Andy swept his light across the trees one last time, but no monsters, ghosts, or devils showed themselves. Just dark, crooked trees merging with the black of night.

And left the scene, trying to bury his thoughts for tonight, the next twenty-four hours until he found himself there again, searching for phantom signs of evidence, some concrete answer he could give Samantha to ease her grief. He hadn't spoken to her since that night when he'd finally had to return to Slim's and deliver the news. She'd taken it like a champ, though he could see her holding it in, see it in the extra care she took pouring coffee for him and herself, the way she'd forgotten he didn't drink coffee, the extra flick of the lighter necessary to spark it, the way she settled into the booth and then into herself, arms folded, chin lowered. She'd lost her natural grace and

openness and ease and become a Samantha only slightly left of the one he knew but still different. He'd delivered news like this fifty or sixty times by then, often to people he'd known most of his life, but no amount of hysterics had unsettled him as much as this minor shift. Since childhood, Samantha had been strong, direct, opinionated, aware. Andy had expected her to lash out against the news, not withdraw.

Now he walked into the brightly lit Wawa convenience store and waved to Charity behind the deli counter. She grinned and started making a hoagie for him. She had his routine down cold – Italian on Monday, steak and cheese on Tuesday, meatball on Wednesday, off on Friday and Saturday, and grilled chicken on Sunday. He'd miss her if she moved back to Camden after her husband got out of the state prison here. Many families of prisoners had moved to town to be closer, but unlike many of them, Charity had brought something to this town. He grabbed a soda from the coolers and chided himself for sounding like his father, who wouldn't come to a town he'd grown up in since retiring to the shore.

"Keeping the peace?" Charity said.

"Trying."

Andy wasn't the best conversationalist, and he felt it at moments like this when someone as open and friendly as Charity engaged him. Sometimes he felt like he was watching himself say the words rather than actually speaking. They just came out, responses, never initial statements. He'd probably beat himself up about it for the next

hour, but words just didn't form. After knowing Samantha most of their childhood, having a crush on her of varying intensities since high school, he'd finally reached a level of comfort with her just before her parents died.

"That's all the Lord asks," Charity said.

"Sure," he said. He hadn't been to church since he was fifteen.

He watched her hands work on the hoagie, assembling the meats and cheeses just right so it would all hold together. He couldn't see the dark skin of her hands through her rubber gloves, but he could see the shape, and they looked knotted, arthritic already for such a young woman. She couldn't be more than twenty. The wearing down life had on good people disturbed Andy, had led him to become a police officer. Now he wished he could help her in some small way beyond the tip he usually left. So many things he wanted to do that he couldn't.

"All set, honey," she said. "Enjoy it."

"You, too," he said as he turned away.

He shook his head. "You, too?" He turned around.

"Uh, have a nice night," he said.

"With you out there, officer," she said, resting her chin on the Plexiglas top of the deli counter, "I'm sure I will."

He smiled and raised his soda in salute. She waved a weary hand.

After he paid, Andy drove down Second towards High Street. He parked in a bank parking lot just down the street from Slim's. The mostly darkened four blocks of downtown spread up the hill in front of him. Glass City had once been a thriving community, centered around the glass industry that gave it its names, but like so many industrial towns and cities, it had fallen on hard times in the 1980s, a couple hundred years after its modest beginnings. Most of the plants had closed, and much of the population found itself at a loss for employment, many turning to low-paying service jobs. Recently, the city had turned much of the downtown into an arts district, and to some extent, it had attracted people and revitalized it, though most of the traditional businesses had fallen by the wayside or moved to the dozens of strip malls and shopping centers in the outlying parts of town. Only three long-standing businesses had remained, the first three on the corner of High and Main, Slim's Diner, Sherman's Feed Store, and the hardware store Andy's family owned.

Even with revitalization, however, progress seemed slow to come if at all. City and county officials had promised the prisons would bring employment, and they had, but they also brought even more people under economic strain and more problems. A few blocks from downtown, neighborhoods had become plagued with many of the troubles of urban America – drug trade, violence, poverty. Property values fell, which meant property taxes fell, and the schools lost money and struggled more to serve the desperate but often uninspired population. Not that Andy could criticize that

population. He had enough smarts to leave, but like so many others, he stuck with what he knew, even if what he knew was on life support. Thinking about it now, he told himself he had things to finish.

From his vantage point, he could see in Slim's window, see Samantha working. He shut off the headlights and ate by the glow of his in-car computer console. Every now and then, he caught a glimpse of Samantha moving about, pouring coffee, taking orders, wiping tabletops, laughing at some joke one of the late-night regulars made – city cops and truck drivers mostly. At 2:45, she stepped outside and smoked a cigarette in the shadows. He could just see the orange glow of the tip, pulsing when she inhaled. I imagined what he couldn't see – her honey-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, her long, thin body stretched against the wall, her blue eyes focused poised to flicker to anger or wit. After a couple of minutes, she stepped out of view, and Andy headed back out for the last four hours of his patrol of the desolate state roads.

Samantha Foster took another drag from her cigarette and looked up as she blew smoke past her eyes. She saw the car in the darkened parking lot like she did every night. She knew she should think "stalker," knew she just had to change her habits a little, but she didn't. Andy Weichert had never struck her as harmful. She'd like to see him really, even if his restrained affection unnerved her. Yet he hadn't stepped foot in Slim's since her parents died. Samantha and Andy had seemed headed for something

before the accident. She leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes. The same circle of thoughts every night. Maybe it made sense that he didn't see her, maybe he knew this would happen, or maybe it wouldn't if they would move past it.

Samantha loved her parents, but their expectations and her failure to meet them had caused a lot of tension. They worked hard, believed in giving back to the community, in living up to a certain liberal American ideal. You worked hard, and then you worked harder. Even when relaxing, you engaged your intellect. Though intelligent, Samantha had struggled in school, getting in trouble for being too opinionated and sharp-tongued. The more she'd failed to please her parents, the more she'd acted out, and as a teenager, she'd lost her way, spent time with the wrong people. In her second year of college, she'd dropped out and become a waitress.

Even before the accident, Andy had reminded Samantha of her parents. That might have been part of the difficulty between them. She'd envisioned a life where his straight-and-narrow ideals put the same expectations and pressure on her. Still, those qualities had attracted her, too. In their talks, he'd begun to inspire her, and she'd been close to returning to college. Then her parents died, and along with grief came a paid-for house, insurance money, financial comfort to stifle her motivation.

Voices whispered nearby. Shoes scraped against pavement.

Samantha opened her eyes.

Two teenaged boys dressed in black stood at the end of the alley, a scrawny one wearing glasses and a tall one. The scrawny kid whispered into the other's ear. Andy couldn't see them from his spot. No one could. She stared at them. They stared back, a stalemate between a car and animals. Who would move first? She could simply walk inside, but she didn't want them following her in there.

"You got a light, lady?" the scrawny boy said.

Samantha ignored him.

"I said, you got a light?"

Samantha stubbed out her cigarette.

"Get a blow job?" the tall boy said, erupting into spurting giggles.

The scrawny boy punched him on the shoulder.

"Why don't you boys move along?" Samantha said.

"Uh, no," Scrawny said.

Samantha shrugged and walked backwards toward the diner entrance.

She bumped into a chunky boy. She could smell cheap wine. He turned her around pushed her towards the alley. Andy had to have seen that. Jesus, there were three cops inside. Samantha started to open her mouth, and the guy covered it with his dirty hand. Down the alley, the boys stood with their hands on their hips, their chests pumped out, triumphant gunslingers.

"See if she's got a light," Scrawny said.

The guy holding her groped her with one hand but did manage to search her apron pockets and find a book of matches. She tasted sweat from his palm and gagged.

"Got them, Sco – Darkhelm," the boy behind her said, his voice scratchy.

The scrawny boy, Darkwhatever, swaggered up the alley. When he reached them, he looked Samantha in the face and pushed his glasses up his nose with an extra flourish.

"All you had to do was say yes," he said.

He had a swirl of dyed dark hair and bad acne rubbed red by some kind of cleanser. Something seemed familiar about him. He pocketed the matches.

"What are we gonna do with her?" the boy holding her said.

Darkwhatever stuck out his pinky. It had a longer fingernail than the rest of his fingers. He ran it down Samantha's cheek along her neck to the top of her uniform shirt, then pulled it away. It all seemed rehearsed right down to his punch line.

"Nothing," he said. "I don't like smokers."

The boy let go of her, and she coughed and wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. He followed the other boys down the alley, their trench coats billowing for all their worth. Samantha had fallen to her knees. She spit. After the boys turned the corner out of the alley, running footsteps and laughter disappeared into the night.

Across the street, Andy's car was gone.

Rory McDonough woke up bleary-eyed and stuffed up and stumbled to the bathroom. Down the hall, his mother fried bacon and eggs for her boyfriend, Howard Stern blaring on the radio. He relieved himself, lathered up a damp washcloth, scrubbed his armpits and dick, and returned to his bedroom. He looked in his closet for fresh clothes, hoping he'd discover some he wanted to wear, some with a new color, but he only saw black. Many of the shirts and jeans had once been different colors, but in high school, he had dyed them all black, trying to fit in with a crowd of rebellious boys. He blacked sneakers with shoe polish, found a trench coat at a thrift store. It had been cool then, a conscious fuck you to the establishment and society – "Yeah, we're dressing like killers. The fuck you looking at?" Now it just seemed a colossal waste of time. He didn't tell his friends that, on the rare occasions he still talked to them, but he suspected they felt the same.

He donned the cleanest black clothes he could find – who could really tell beyond the smell – grabbed his backpack, and headed to the kitchen. His mother handed a plate to her boyfriend Joe Meeks, a guard at the prison where Rory's father was locked up. They'd moved down here to be near Rory's father. Three years later, she was fucking this jackass. Meeks didn't acknowledge either of them, just shoved food into his mouth while he read the newspaper.

"Still some left," Maude McDonough said to Rory.

"I'm off animals this week," he said.

Meeks snorted, scratched his uniformed chest.

Maude shrugged but smiled at Rory. As much as he hated her most days, he could still see dear, old mom in her smile, a smile that rarely crept out of her prematurely aged face. When it did show, it spun illusions, added sparkle to her blue eyes, sheen to her black hair, luminance to her skin. When they'd lived up north, when Rory's father Paul had still been around, Maude had been his best friend. She'd helped him weather Paul's frequent absences by paying attention to Rory, talking to him, listening to him, making sure they had fun. When Paul was home and his temper got out of hand, she calmed him, kept the house in order, made him spend time with Rory, made sure Paul kept business away from the house. As Rory got older, he'd suspected that she'd stuck with Paul in part for Rory's sake. Paul had never been more than a low-level crook, so she couldn't have stayed around for the benefits; there weren't any. Maybe she'd loved him, but after they'd moved here, she'd clearly given up on Paul, and Rory had given up on her.

Now he grabbed two pieces of white bread and a grocery store brand soda from the refrigerator and went into the living room to wait for Meeks to finish eating so he could drop him off at the community college.

Maude followed Rory, and he glanced up long enough to see her cinching her thin bathrobe over her camisole. Jesus, he thought, put some clothes on. She sat on the couch and watched him watch TV, her eyes boring into his skull. Just talk, he told

himself, say anything so she doesn't say whatever it is she has to say. He couldn't find the words, couldn't find a subject.

"You know," she said, "you took a shower, brushed your hair, you might catch a girl's eye."

"I washed," he said.

"Just saying," she said. "You could use a little...companionship."

Is that what you call boning Meeks, he thought.

"I'm cool," he said.

"I'm cool," Meeks said, in a mock dumb guy voice.

Maude sighed.

"Let's roll, chief," Meeks said.

Rory snatched up his bag and headed for the door, averting his gaze from Maude and Meeks kissing. He opened the door and stepped out, expecting Meeks to be behind him. When he wasn't, Rory turned around just in time to see Meeks grabbing Maude's ass. Rory turned away and looked at the street, lined with beat-up cars in front of run-down hundred-year-old houses. His art history teacher talked about how nice that part of town had been before industry started dying, before the long-time citizens moved to newer houses or different cities, before the prison families arrived. Rory had seen black and white pictures, and even in the Depression, it had looked

better than it did now. The teacher might be right. Rory lit a cigarette. Meeks slapped his back.

"The Daydream Kid," he said.

Rory spit.

On the road, he looked out the window, first at more of the crumbling town, then when they hit the state highway at the short pine trees and sandy soil, the same soil that had birthed the glass industry that used to dominate the town's economy. Jesus, he thought, have I been listening to teachers? Stern blared on Meeks' radio. Rory decided to look at him, see if he could discern anything about the man other than his gleeful abuse of their family's situation. He worked out. He was surprisingly neat – perfect flattop, well-trimmed mustache, pressed uniform (which he must have done himself because Maude didn't even own an iron). Maybe he was a decent guy, better than Rory's dad. He did help pay the rent and had bought Rory's school books. Maybe he loved Maude.

"What are you looking at, prick?" Meeks said.

You, cocksucker, Rory thought.

"Nothing."

"Yeah," Meeks said, taking an exit off the highway. The community college sat on the side of the highway, a three-story brick building with darkened windows and fading 1970s style signs – curvy lowercase letters on curvy pieces of brown metal. The

prison stood on the other side, a ten-story monument to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century architecture, a pleasant mix of bricks and artfully arranged concrete that looked more like a college than the college if you ignored the high, slit-like windows. Some days, Rory hoped his father could see out, could see him walking into the college, alone, clad in black.

"Learn shit," Meeks said as he dropped him off.

Rory didn't thank him. He just headed off toward the school, walking ten steps behind his art history teacher. The old man seemed preoccupied with something, like usual, and Rory ducked past him without saying a word.

Rhonda Wallace woke a 3:30 A.M. to go work an early shift at South Jersey Java downtown. On the way out to the bathroom, she ran her fingers across her art history text book, smiled. She'd already decorated the edges of the page in bright marker with her nickname, Honda.

The class at the community college had surprised her. She'd known she'd find some interest in it, but she'd also figured she'd know a lot of the information and find herself longing for art school. The professor, Mr. Rheingold, didn't have a natural teaching ability, but he was a glass artisan, and his passion managed to show through his fuddy-duddy demeanor. Then there was the boy.

In the bathroom, Honda stared at herself in the mirror for a moment. She knew she could stand to lose a few pounds, and she questioned her own decision to dye her

hair a purplish red, but she saw possibility, too. Her father, who'd left many years ago, had at least given her something genetically. He was part Filipino, and the mix of his features and her mother's Caucasian features made her face slightly exotic. She liked the hint of tan in her skin, her gray-blue eyes. Maybe he would, too, if he ever looked up.

As she showered, she tried to think about art, the various projects she had in mind, collages, self-portraits, a manga, maybe a sculpture. Her older sister Meg often wondered how she could stay happy when they'd struggled so much on their mother's single income, when she'd had to forego so many opportunities, settle for so much. Honda sometimes wondered, too, thinking at times that she worked so hard in order to keep the sadness away. Other times, she told herself and Meg that the work proved her hope. That a person who should look at the world with a cynic's point of view could create beauty in that world justified it. Maybe she did the work to fight despair, but she believed it a good fight. Meg would shake her head and smile, maybe say something like, "So serious about happiness."

Now Honda dressed. She had many outrageous outfits she'd pieced together as part of her style, but she went for simple, a T-shirt, overalls, and painted-on Converse All-Stars. Her outfits suited colder weather. More importantly, she'd caught him studying her when she wore overalls. "Him," she thought and shook her head. She knew his name, Rory, but she liked to think of him as some mysterious pronoun. It

made him even more unknowable than his subdued personality already did. It made him a project.

Her mother slept on the couch in the living room. Poor woman. She worked a swing shift at a nursing home. She had wanted to be a nurse but never finished school, and this job offered the closest thing she could find. A horrible job in a horrible place, but it paid the mortgage, kept them fed, had job security. Honda worked forty hours or more a week to pay for her own college, gas, cell phone, and art supplies. Someday soon, she thought, her mother could just look after herself.

Honda worked alone from 4:15 to 5:15 when a co-worker would show up. The store opened at 5:30. She kept the lights dimmed except those in the small kitchen and above the counter and made sure all the supplies were stocked for the commuter rush. Luckily for South Jersey Java, Starbucks hadn't made it to town yet, and Wawa posed their main competition. Honda went back into the kitchen and washed some dishes the night shift had been too lazy to wash. When she shut off the water, she heard pounding in the café.

She pushed the kitchen door open a few inches, and the pounding grew louder. A boy dressed in black beat on the window. Honda couldn't quite make him out, and her heart beat faster. Maybe Rory had noticed her, had seen *The Graduate*, and had come to declare his love. Honda pushed the door open a little more, and light from the

kitchen glinted on the boy's face. Glasses. Not Rory. The boy pounded on the window harder.

"I seeeeee you," he said.

Honda crouched and scooted behind the counter on her knees, making her way toward her backpack, which she'd stowed underneath.

"Coffeeeeeee," the boy yelled. "Caffeeeeeeeiine. Braaaaaaiinnns."

Honda took her cell phone out of her bag and clutched it. She'd call the police as soon as she caught her breath.

"Baaaayyyby, please," the boy yelled. "I needeed you."

The pounding stopped. Honda peered over the counter. The boy pressed his mouth against the window. Honda ducked back behind the counter.

"Heyyyyy!"

She peered over the counter again as she dialed 911. The boy flashed a wicked grin, grabbed his crotch, spun around, and marched away. Honda closed her cell phone and sat behind the counter for a few minutes. By the time her co-worker arrived, Honda was all smiles and hard work again. Rory wouldn't act that way, she told herself as she wiped the boy's lip imprints off the window.

As she trudged across the community college parking lot, Honda saw Rory. He smoked a cigarette by the entrance to the college. Even without her glasses, she knew

his image, the lanky line of black topped by a flame of red hair. Her breath sharpened as she marched toward him. She imagined him saying hi, maybe offering her a cigarette (which she'd refuse of course), the beginning of a future in one moment.

As she passed him, she focused her gaze at him. He looked at his feet, and for a brief second, she decided *she* would ask him for a cigarette, but then she might have to smoke it. Instead, she brushed past him. In the long, sterile hallway, she saw Mr. Rheingold ahead of her. He carried a briefcase and a metal pail. He stopped at the row of picture windows, set down the briefcase and pail, and gazed out at the pond. Honda stepped beside him and looked out, too. A goose landed on the water.

"Pretty, huh?" she said.

Mr. Rheingold looked over at her and nodded. He had no idea who she was.

"What's today's topic?" she said.

He looked at her again, rubbed one of his eyes behind his glasses. It squeaked.

"I'm sorry?" he said.

"Oh," she said. "I'm – I'm in your art history class, front row."

His lips curled up into a smile.

"Of course you are," he said. "I'm in preclass mode, you know. I tend to get in a daze."

"So," she said, "what's today's topic?"

"I'd like to keep that a surprise," he said. He leaned over conspiratorially and spoke in a stage whisper. "But I'll give you clue. You're looking at it."

"I'll keep it a secret," she said back in her own stage whisper.

He nodded and picked up his belongings.

"I'll see you soon, uh – "

"Rhonda," she said. "But people call me Honda."

"Ah," he said. "Sometime, I'll have to introduce you to my niece Suzuki."

He chuckled, and she laughed. He'd used the same joke the first day of class.

Honda sat alone in the front row, waiting for Mr. Rheingold, waiting for Rory. Other kids chatted around her about classes, movies, boys, Ocean City, Atlantic City, Wildwood. One girl had hooked up with a guy from Philly over the summer. No one spoke to Honda. She didn't mind. Some of them would later at work when they came in to spend their parents' money, and she could always call one of her friends who'd left town for college or life in Philly or New York. Still, she hated one thing about community college; it felt like high school.

She doodled in a sketchpad and heard Rory before she saw him. His long coat swished against his jeans. She closed her sketchpad, hiding a drawing of him. Then she smelled him, stale cigarettes, old sweat. He plopped down in the desk behind her.

"Damn," a boy named T.J. said.

Honda tapped her feet on the floor. She both wanted Mr. Rheingold to show up and didn't. If he did, he could distract her for fifty minutes before she had to decide what to do. If he didn't, she'd have an opportunity to make the first overture. Somewhere in the back of the room, a student brought up the fifteen-minute rule and claimed Mr. Rheingold only had three minutes left. The clock on the wall ran fast. Still, he was late, and she had to decide soon. She turned around in her seat. Rory's gaze moved up, paused at her breasts – he shifted in his seat – then stopped at her neck. She began to speak. Mr. Rheingold walked through the door.

Arthur Rheingold entered the classroom without a word, and the students didn't quiet down. This was normal. They would chatter away to each other or into their ubiquitous cell phones until he told them to do otherwise or began writing on the chalkboard. They were mostly good, or bored, and he didn't have to discipline them much, or he didn't bother disciplining them because, as far as he was concerned, they were adults and fully in charge of their own behavior. Adults shouldn't need to be guided through life on an award/punishment system. Time to make choices based on the merit of the choice, the possible consequences on other people, not if they'd receive a check or an X, A or F, heaven or hell.

Focus, he told himself. You have to teach about art, not your personal brand of philosophy/theology. They were not here for that. He set his briefcase on the broad

particleboard table at the front of the classroom and set a metal pail of sand next to it. He flipped open the briefcase, took out a sheet of paper, and wrote the date on the top line. He looked at the print of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* taped to the inside of the briefcase's lid, scratched his chin, and shut the briefcase. They are not ready for Bosch, he told himself. Fourteen more weeks to reach that point. He looked up finally at the students, mostly young, 18 or 19, of a wide array of ethnic and economic backgrounds. His eyes looked past the purple-haired girl from the hall and fell on the boy in black – Arthur had yet to learn their names, let alone many of their faces, but he recognized this one with his Hamlet garb and just stumbled in from the Pine Barrens look, the unkempt reddish hair, the wild, hurt stare. Yet this one paid attention, or seemed to, and that as much as the look had caught Arthur's attention.

He cleared his throat.

They quieted down, pushed buttons on their cell phones.

"Glass," he said. "Who can tell me about glass?"

He hated to lecture, always asked questions first, hoping to discuss, hoping not to seem like an old authoritarian, a God above the rabble.

"Anything," he said. "One item."

They stared back at him as if he had spoken in Chinese, even the girl, who he remembered now usually participated.

"It doesn't have to be important," he said. "Does it just show up? Are you so accustomed to it that you don't even understand why I would talk about it in an art history class? Have you ever thought one second of your life about glass?"

They averted their eyes. He'd grown too parent-like.

"Glass," he said again.

"Holds Colt," a black boy said from somewhere inside a hooded jacket.

Some kids laughed.

Arthur nodded.

"Hold's your mama's crack," another black boy said. His shoes matched the light blue of his jacket.

The first one had his legs propped on the desk in front of him, so he leaned his desk over to reach the second one and punched his shoulder.

"It is good for heating things," Arthur said, trying to turn the off-color remark into education.

The boy in black raised his hand.

Arthur pointed at him as he handed the dated sheet of paper to the girl.

"When I was little," the boy in black said in a soft voice, "I-I used to stand by the window and, like, blow on it, and it would fog up."

Arthur smiled.

"Did you ever write or draw in the fog?"

The boy shrugged and nodded at the same time.

"Good," Arthur said.

"You can see through it," the girl said.

"Most of the time, yes," Arthur said.

"BREAKS!" the first black boy bellowed.

"Indeed," Arthur said. "How old do you think it is?"

Nothing.

"Would you believe," Arthur said, leaning against the table, "that human beings have been making glass for over 4,000 years?"

They stared. Many of them wrote it down.

"Yes," he said. "That's the 2,000 years of our time, A.D., and 2,000 years before our time, B.C. And if you believe your Bible for all it's worth, that means there have only been about 2,000 years where we didn't have glass in the world. And we're still using it today."

More writing. He regretted the Bible comment. Though he believed in God as a creator, he didn't view The Bible's version as correct. The students waited for him to say more, stared. Arthur had missed the beat, gotten lost in his own nonsense. He picked up the pail and dumped its contents on the table. The sand poured out smooth and silent. Cleaning it up would take some time. He hadn't thought that through, too pleased with the idea of the dramatic gesture.

"That, dug up from my yard," he said, "good old South Jersey sand, mixed with a few chemicals and heated to temperatures that would kill us, that becomes this..." he tapped the lenses of his glasses, "this..." he wheeled out the overhead projector, which he never used, and tapped the lenses on that, "this..." he tapped the glass surface of the projector, "the bulb inside, the bulbs above us, the test tubes in your chemistry class, the windshields on your cars, the bottles of booze the young man mentioned, windows, television screens, lenses for cameras, and..." he grabbed a piece of chalk and scrawled the word "art" across the chalkboard as largely and dramatically as he could, "this."

He pointed at the word again. Then he scooped up some sand and let it run through his fingers.

"This," Arthur said, "to that."

More writing of notes. He was pleased.

"Amazing," he said. "'But art?' you say. 'Yes,' I say. We have vases from ancient Egypt and Rome – is there nothing those people didn't do – medieval mosaics and stained-glass windows and on and on up to artists still making objects out of glass today. Some right here in our little city."

"They blow it, right?" the black boy said.

His friend/enemy laughed an immature laugh.

"I'm serious," the boy said. "I seen it at that old place in town, where they ride the funny bikes and shit."

"Yes," Arthur said, "uh – what's your name again?"

"Terrence," the boy said, "but everybody calls me T.J."

"Ah," Arthur said. "Terrence – ahem – T.J. is exactly right. You see, glass is an odd substance. It isn't exactly a solid, like this table say, or a liquid, like water. It's a bit of both, and if you heat it hot enough – again, very hot – it becomes molten, a liquid you can control, shape to your whims, and this particular method has been around for 2,000 or so years. And glassmaking and glassblowing helped build this town."

"Glass plant laid off my dad," T.J. said.

Arthur nodded at this sad truth, the decay of the business he had once dedicated himself to. He didn't let on about this or that he was one of the artists in question. No need for them to know him. Not yet certainly. And if he addressed T.J.'s grievance, he would certainly open the doorway to the thoughts that haunted him, his own Boschian fish-demon wriggling about in his cluttered brain, his grand theory about the flaws of the universe.

"A shame," Arthur said. "Once upon a time, though, that industry was magnificent. This very building is named after the family that built the first glass plant here, one that closed long before even your father was born, T.J."

He looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes of class left. He looked down at the pile of sand. The next teacher would not be happy.

"That's enough for today," he said. "Read chapter three in your textbooks for Wednesday."

They were rustling their books before he finished the sentence.

"Ah," he said, "and could someone, um, help me clean up this mess?"

Most of them ignored him.

The boy in black handed him the attendance sheet and started to turn away.

"Young man," Arthur said, "perhaps you could help."

The boy shrugged but set his backpack down next to a desk. He waited for the last students to pass before stepping up to the table. On the way out, T.J. nodded his chin forward and up at Arthur, who nodded back. He had heard his fellow, more experienced teachers talk about moments like that, moments of small connections.

"So," Arthur said, "how to do this."

He ran his hand across his balding head a few times. He noticed the girl hovering near the door and thought he should invite her to help, too, but when he looked more directly at her, she disappeared.

"Why don't you hold the pail at the edge of the table," Arthur said, "and I'll try to scoop the sand off the side and into the pail."

The boy picked up the pail and held it against the table.

Arthur pushed at the pile of sand with his briefcase. Some of it tumbled over, and much of it spilled into the pail as it should, but a lot poured over the edges of the

table, too, onto the boy's shoes and the floor. The boy grimaced. Arthur cupped small piles of sand with his hands and shoved those in more successfully. He continued this until the table was mostly clear. Then he took off his sweater and wiped the rest of the sand onto the floor. He spread it around with his feet, and the boy followed suit.

"You young ones are tracking it in all the time," Arthur said, "rushing in from early-morning surfing in Ocean City."

The boy almost grinned.

Arthur opened his briefcase and dropped the attendance sheet inside it.

"What's that?" the boy said.

Arthur glanced at the print.

"A painting," he said, "a very old painting by a Dutch painter. We'll discuss it later in the semester."

"It looks creepy," the boy said.

"That it is," Arthur said.

The boy nodded some sort of approval.

Arthur extended his hand, and the boy looked at it, momentarily puzzled, then shook it with a limp, clammy grip. Only now did Arthur notice the boy's body odor.

He feigned rubbing his nose in order to cover it for a moment.

"Thank you," he said, "uh – I'm sorry. Terrible with names."

"Rory," the boy said. "Rory McDonough."

"That's a Good name," Arthur said. "I don't think I know any McDonoughs in this area. You're not originally from here, are you?"

Rory shook his head.

"My family wasn't either," Arthur said. "Well... "

"I can carry this," Rory said.

"I can manage, Rory," Arthur said.

Rory handed him the pail and looked at his feet. Arthur immediately felt some shame, felt he wasn't living by his own principles, was living against them rather than embracing them, rather than cutting through the walls. He felt his shoulder, moved it around.

"Then again," he said, "the arthritis is kicking in."

He handed the pail to Rory, and they walked out of the building and to the parking lot without speaking another word.