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never been there

LUTHER BLACKTOP

ROBERT REVOLVER



Never Been There
Luther Blacktop

A Robert Revolver book

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LUTHER BLACKTOP

Mikey hauls himself up from the leather couch in his parents' living room. The backside of his legs stick to the liquid residue left over from last night's party. A pre-party actually, one designed to keep the oath. *Bros before hoes.*

"Dude, what are we gonna do tonight?" He asks, wiping his hand across his whole face. His bare feet shimmy toward the front door and the shadowy figure standing outside the frosted glass side window. "I wanna get with Stacy tonight. Like really fuckin' bad, man."

He opens the door and makes as little eye contact as possible with the teenager in the red hat standing on his step. There's a large, steaming box held in the kid's left hand. It fills Mikey's nostrils, setting them on fire with their eleven secret herbs and spices. Inhaling that first spicy, delicious breath, he hastily fishes the money from his pocket and makes a seamless exchange across the threshold of the door. A handful of bills goes one way and a fresh, twenty piece, jumbo family combo mix-n-match comes back the other. *Even Steven, kid. Let's eat.*

Mikey shuffles back into the living room and slides the greasy cardboard box across the top of the oak coffee table, pushing aside the game controllers and plates of half eaten pizza from the night before.

"You need to get her scared, man," Josh says leaning forward and reaching for the chicken while offering a solution to his best friend's conundrum. "You know she gets scared easy."

"We ain't rentin' a movie and sittin' around together with you guys, man." Mikey retorts, wrinkling up the side of his face in disapproval. "She ain't into that."

"Naw, not like that." Josh pauses, working his fingers through the bucket, separating the original recipe from the new, tangy sweet and sour. "I mean you need to take her somewhere. Chicks get so wet when they're freaked out like that."

Mikey's face snaps back to normal. The thought of Stacy's shivering cotton panties start dancing in his head. "Okay, but where? There ain't nothin' scary around here."

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?" Josh laughs, rolling back into the couch and

laying his first bite into an original drummy. "You didn't hear about what happened in Mannsville a couple years ago? You should take her down there."

"Mannsville? You talking like the Mannsville on 70? What the fuck happened there?"

* * * * *

Mannsville, Kentucky. Population: 140

Two years earlier, late summer. As usual, the air is thick with humidity and buzzing with enraged locusts. The dwindling population is an old, hand-painted "140" in desperate need of an update. Of the few people still hanging around, there's hardly a man or woman who didn't live through the last great war. Aside from the fresh government mile-marker at the edge of town, nobody really cares about Mannsville anymore. It's all been written off. There's still a church, a rail stop (freight only) and a historically recognized landmark called, "*Mannsville Grease 'n Tire*." That's all they have left. If not for Social Security, they would have already rolled up their sidewalks and bulldozed everything into another tobacco field.

"Alright, Mr. Blacktop. Just how you gonna do this? There ain't no bringin' this back."

The voice belongs to an elderly man named Milton. He's one of the old guard, born and raised within the Mannsville township limits. *When it was a township*. There was a time when he worked at the sawmill sixteen hours a day. He rough cut planks and bucked out phone poles, loading them on trucks and sending them on down the highway. Times were booming back then. There were town meetings, pot-luck dinners and dances every Saturday night. The years following the war were alright too. So were the sixties. But then in the seventies, the jobs started to dry up. Kids started to go slack in the wrist. They found drugs and bright lights in the city. The girls came and went. They had no character, no integrity. It was all too easy. They lost their sense of home. They started to leave and never came back. Now, thirty years later there are only memories left, each one etched into the hard lines of the Milton's face.

"Tell me, Milton, have you ever seen one of... *these* before?"

Luther reaches in his pocket and pulls out a small pile of something that he hides in his hand. His name is Blacktop, but he always tries to introduce himself simply as Luther. He feels accomplished for being just twenty-eight years old. He's dressed in a nice black suit, slacks and matching fancy shoes. He has a nice

watch attached to his wrist. His has jet black hair that he keeps looking wet, trimmed short and parted on the left. *Like a preacher*. He looks down through his low-power, black-rimmed glasses knowing that his eyes shine with deep blue intensity. His fingers uncoil slowly, breaking the ice with a patient reveal.

Milton looks down at the dull silver, identifying it as a necklace attached to a crude pewter axe head. It looks like something a kid might come home with from the county fair. He lifts his eyes back to meet Luther's. His face is a flat slab of stone, but that's not uncommon. Luther smiles.

"It's an axe."

"Well Christ, son, I can see that. What the hell's that little thing gonna do?"

Luther tempers his enthusiasm and nods his head, respecting the tone of Milton's question momentarily before he answers.

"There's a town to the west of here a ways. It's actually a couple of states over. Five years ago, almost to the day, they were sitting in the same boat that you are. In fact, they may have been a little worse off. They were an Amish colony. They still are, in fact. But back then, not only were they losing their town, they were losing their entire way of life. Everything they had devoted their lives to was disappearing and they didn't have a prayer to stop it."

Luther pauses and pinches the axe head between his fingers, rubbing it back and forth, silently admiring its quality.

"Then one of them, one of the older ones, had had it. He talked to a guy who talked to a guy and that guy talked to me." He pauses and looks up at Milton, who's listening intently.

"Everything sound familiar so far?"

Milton chews his lip and leans back in his chair. He lifts his arms and crosses them in front of his chest—the universal symbol for *"cut to the goddamn chase."*

Luther continues. "So I head out there and I meet this guy. He invites me into his kitchen and sits me down. He shoos his family out of the room and his neighbors away from the windows. He's sweating bullets by the time he finally has it all under control and when he starts talking, he's so angry about the whole situation that he can hardly even speak."

Luther waits again, this time dropping the necklace onto the center of the table and sitting down in his chair. His hands fold together in front of his face and he continues to stare at it, giving Milton just enough time to either demand

the end of the story or to kick him out.

“Okay. Go on.” Milton mutters, tipping his head to the side. Luther smiles and looks up from the necklace, letting a quick laugh escape his lips.

“Well, I guess that’s when I first saw the axe. It was sitting right there, right beside the stove. They probably used it for chopping up supper for all I knew, but the second I saw it, I knew I was gonna do it.”

Milton looks down at the table, squinting a bit. Luther can visualize the puzzle coming together in his head.

“So I told him that he was going to have to kill someone with that axe. And make it big. The bloodier the better.”

“Now hold on one minute.” Milton’s eyes pop open at the punch line. The stone wall has crumbled. He’s visibly disgusted. “We ain’t gonna kill no one here, Mr. Blacktop.”

Luther rolls his tongue across the back of his teeth, slowly passing from one side of his mouth to the other. He can still taste the morning’s shot of bourbon. Milton’s eyes tilt away for a moment and Luther takes this opportunity to stand up from the kitchen table. Sliding his chair back a few inches, it creaks across the hardwood floor before coming to a stop at the edge of living room carpet. Still licking his teeth, he does another quick survey of the kitchen.

Okay, Milton. Where’s your proverbial axe?

There’s a short, single row of cabinets above the sink. They’re small and white and stained dark around the handles. The bare wall space is covered with crudely attached old calendars, handwritten notes and small knick-knacks. The counter is littered with battered old cooking devices, cords and unorganized paperwork. It’s been a long time since it felt a woman’s touch, but it’s still relatively clean and sanitary. Luther turns away and looks through the big picture window behind him, shifting his search into Milton’s backyard.

Milton stands up too, walking over to the sink and washing the leftover coffee grounds out of his cup. Luther listens and rubs his fingers against the dark stubble shading his jawline.

No axe... All right, let’s start with an interesting location...

Outside, the backyard is huge and fenced off on all sides. There is a big garden full of tomatoes and pumpkins. On the other side of the fence is Mannsville Grease ‘n Tire. It’s a three-stall garage with a single gas pump on a gravel driveway. From a distance, its paint looks as sun-bleached as a dry

riverbed. Its service doors sag from their tracks like old skin. There are weeds growing in the driveway and each one of the wooden letters nailed to the front of the building is suffering from irreversible rot. Their colors, once red, white and blue, have all but turned to gray. Overall, it just looks heavy and tired. It's practically begging to swallow a burning match.

"Where's your boy? His name's Edwin, right? I don't think I've seen him since I got here."

"Pfft. Who the hell knows?" Milton scowls and slides his clean cup beside the coffee pot. "Probably off with that devil woman of his. They don't want nothin' to do with this or our business."

Luther suddenly remembers something about the old grease shop being part of the family too. Milton's right, the son didn't want anything to do with that place, ever.

"But he's the one that called me here in the first place, correct? Said he had talked it all over with you beforehand..."

"Well, that figgers. He did, but that's nothin' outta his norm. Thing is, he ain't got no follow-through. Always talkin' but never does more'n leave a mess like this wherever he goes."

Milton joins Luther at the big picture window. The sour stink of fuel oil rolls off his clothes. Together they stand in silence for a long pause before Luther finally pulls his attention away from the service station. He turns to look back at Milton, but not looking him directly in the eye.

"You know, I don't think I can do this, Milton." Luther admits, shaking his head. "Without a killing, this doesn't work. That's a corner we cannot cut. Even if you and your boy were on the same page and we worked a different angle, none of it would last without a killing. There has to be an even trade, Milton. Someone dies or your town dies."

Milton snorts and stands himself up a little taller. He's still wearing the scowl produced when he spoke about his son.

"That Amish..." He remains staring at his old business. There's an extra crease in the corner of his eye, the same kind people kind get when they stand in front of a loved one's headstone. "So they did it, huh? You actually talked him into killing someone with an axe?"

"You could probably make a case for that, but I really just made some suggestions. He was desperate. He did the rest."

Milton's face remains hard, cold and straight to the point.

"Who got killed? How do you choose something like that?"

Luther follows Milton's star back to the garage.

Okay, so that's where you want to do it. It'll work. Unless it's filled to the rafters with garbage, it'll make a great set piece. It would make a great black and white postcard someday, too.

"That's the rub of it all. That's who you have to figure out."

"So who'd that Amish... figure out?" Milton asks.

"His mother."

Milton's face flushes, equally from the answer and from the overall blunt force of its admission.

"Oh no... no... that ain't righ—"

"And his son. And his daughter. And his wife and even their dog. He made a great big mess in that house and when he was done, he hanged himself out in the barn."

Milton looks like he's going to vomit. He steps back and paces over to the sink, shaking his head. Luther discretely records the movements, noting that they look more personal than they do sudden. He also notes the naval service tattoo on Milton's right forearm, hiding under a trail of large, dark grease stains. It's an anchor and some text. It's green and blurry and absolutely authentic. Likely, the man has been no stranger to blood and pain.

"But that didn't solve nothin', then. He don't even know if it worked."

"Milton, I'll admit that whole thing was way over the top. Some people take the ball and run a lot further with it than others. He didn't need to take it that far but like I said, it was a small, small town. And once he got started..."

"Yeah and he's dead now. And his kin are too. That ain't how I want to see it." Milton pauses and looks up at the ceiling, his hands on his hips.

"So, did doing something so terrible change one goddamn thing about that town?"

"That's why I brought the necklace, Milton." Luther looks away from the glass and back to the center of the kitchen table. "The proof's lying right there on your table."

"A goddamn necklace?" He barks. "You made a guy kill his whole family

for a piece of junk like that?"

He growls through his nose, curling his upper lip.

And here comes the knee-jerk rejection...

"I've think I've had enough of this snake oil. Pick up your things and get ou—"

"That's one of five *thousand* necklaces, Milton," Luther snaps, cutting him off and pointing at the chain. His jaw hardens, his eyes going cold. "Those Amish people sell five thousand of those every year now and that's just the beginning."

Luther locks his eyes onto Milton's, holding him there while he digests that fact... *runs the numbers*. His mouth twitches, fighting to repeat the order to leave, but it just can't. A flash of understanding briefly distorts Milton's face. He's putting it all together...

He's thinking about necklaces. They fill the shelves of his gas station, maybe a little roadside gift shop. His old navy buddies get some part time work. They give tours, sell t-shirts. Kids come to town just to get scared. Adults come and take pictures. People write articles. They make TV shows about the town. The moment never dies and it only gets bigger as it gets older. The horror keeps people coming back. Everyone wants to see it, wants to spend their money and bring a little piece of it back home with them. Just to say they've been there. They want to come to Mannsville...

"Okay, Mr. Blacktop." He withdraws. "You've made your pitch but now I wanna show you something." Milton waves his hand toward the living room in the direction of the staircase leading up to the second floor. "I got something that might be able to change your mind."

Milton's scowl hasn't completely disappeared as he turns away, but it's fading. Luther silently lets out a deep breath and slides the necklace off the table and back into his pocket. He follows Milton to the stairs, passing through the living room, noticing that all of the furniture is covered in the same type of dark stains as the cupboards in the kitchen. They are smeared across the walls, too. There's a stack of old newspapers beside the darkest chair and the television is covered in dust. The reek of old fuel oil grows stronger with every step further into the house.

Milton starts up the stairs, not saying another word until they reach the landing and begin down a long hallway that leads to the opposite side of the house. The air feels stale and dry. There are windows at either end of the hall but they're closed tight and covered by black curtains.

"I know you want a killin', but there ain't nobody around here that we need to be killin', Mr. Blacktop." Milton growls. "But this here might do the same trick."

He comes to a total stop, leaving a few feet between himself and the last door on the left. As he reaches for the lock, there suddenly a nervous twitch creeping through his fingers. The change sparks genuine curiosity and Luther pauses, leaving a comfortable distance between the two of them. Milton exhales and turns around, revealing a very different look on his face, like he's suddenly embarrassed to be doing this.

"Okay, Mr. Blacktop. This is what I wanted to show you."

Milton's cheeks balloon out, filled with air while he lets out an exaggerated breath and slowly opens the door. The latch turns with a squeak, followed by an angry groan from the hinges as the door opens in front of him. A toxic, thick cloud of old fuel oil is released into the hallway, mixed with smells of sugar and mixed with human filth. It overtakes Luther's senses before he even has a chance...

"Oh god, Milton. What in the —"

Luther chokes, turning away, chasing the fresh air. The stench burns his nose and pools on his tongue. He gags at first, but the aftertaste is sweet, like candy. He coughs again and steps closer, curiosity pulling him through the open door.

And suddenly it doesn't matter what it smells like. He's not even breathing anyway. His eyes pop open and his jaw falls slack. Again, he thinks of the phone conversation he had with Milton's son. He had stressed that the town already had a deep, dark secret but that his father would never let it get out.

This has to be it...

"Oh Jesus..."

There, in the middle of the room is a little boy sitting cross-legged on a badly stained, circular rug. He doesn't even notice them enter the room and just keeps playing with his pile of wooden blocks, slowly stacking them together, careful not to let them fall. At any other time, this would be a completely normal kid doing what a normal kid does and hardly worth a second thought. However, there's nothing normal about this kid.

This kid doesn't have any skin. None. It's like an anatomy illustration come to life. Every muscle, tendon and bone is clearly visible, all held together by a thin membrane that could be cellophane coated in Jello ...

“Josey, there’s somebody here to see you. His name is Luther Blacktop.”

Milton’s voice is tender. The boy responds and looks away from his blocks. As he does, his hand plows through the tower he was building and knocks them over. His wrinkled, pink, skinless face distorts, squeezing the tears out of eyes. Luther watches, horrified, while his translucent eyelids begin blinking from left to right. They’re milky and reptilian...

But... he’s not a lizard. He’s a—

Josey suddenly looks away. He starts to cry, sobbing like a completely normal little kid, shaking like a completely normal kid.

But again, this is not a normal kid...

His lips hang loose, jiggling across the front of his bright, white teeth. The muscles stretched between his jaws tremble, glistening behind a layer of translucent grease. Milton crouches down and collects Josey in his arms, lifting him up to his side. The grease spreads from the boy’s body and onto his shirt and his arms. He cracks an odd smile as if he just rescued a newborn fawn from drowning.

“I’m sorry, son. We’ll build it again.” he says, hitching him higher. Josey’s tears quickly dry into sniffles. He’s so small and thin. His whole body shakes as one. He reaches up and rubs his eyes.

“Who is he, Grandpa?” he asks, his tone and manners mimicking Milton’s almost perfectly, but with a noticeable lisp. His jaws part, letting his tongue probe around the inside of his mouth. Without full cheeks, it looks so unnatural, like some kind of blind snake peeking out from the depths of his throat.

“Well, that’s who I wanted you to meet.” Milton smiles, rocking his arms and rotating back toward Luther. “This man is gonna help us save our town.”

The boy looks confused, but then again, it’s incredibly difficult to read any emotion on his non-existent face. His serpentine eyes drop to Luther’s feet and back up again, sizing up every detail of his suit and jacket. Finally, when he meets face to face, he snaps his head back and buries it behind Milton’s neck.

“I don’t like him, Grandpa. He lookth at me funny.”

Luther is still in shock, watching the shiny little pink boy shy away from him and his shoulders contort their sharp, spindly across his back. His spine weaves down below them with only a thin layer of mucus covering the individual ligaments holding together his vertebrae.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” Luther stutters. His brain digging deep to find

any type of explanation for the thing he's staring at. It's hard to even consider it human. *Maybe it is a reptile...*

"You've never seen anything like him, have you?" Milton answers, his voice remaining soft and patient. "I know you haven't. And neither has anyone else."

He then turns away, bouncing the little bag of muscles in his arms a few times and whispering kindness in his ear. He then gently sets him back in the center of the rug. "There there, you've no need to worry about this guy. He was just payin' us a visit from the big city."

Josey sucks in his last snuffles and smiles, suddenly intrigued by Milton's final words.

"The big thity?" He asks and looks up again, his eyes wide and filled with wonder. Milton knowingly nods and rubs his fingers through the grease on top of the boy's skull.

"Yep. The kind with that smelly water you like to swim in."

Josey's face lifts higher, his smile bursting into a giggle. He lifts his fingers and covers his mouth while he laughs, rocking his body back and forth on his tailbone. "Oh yeah, Grandpa. That water ticklth me!"

Luther can't hold himself back from joining in the laugh. It's beyond comprehension. Josey's voice crackles with glee bringing the vision of a living skeleton doing a cannonball off the high board into his mind. He imagines the oil separating from his body and coating the top of the water with all the colors of the rainbow. He squats down and begins helping him gather his blocks.

"Let's start again. Hello, Josey. I'm Luther." He announces, offering a quick wave.

And this time Josey waves back, opening his palm and revealing it him. The fingers are deeply stained with oil, appearing almost entirely black. "Hi, Mithter Luther. I'm Joethy."

"Thank you, Josey," Milton joins in, lifting his hand off the boy's head. "We're gonna go talk about the city and I'll come back for you 'round suppertime, okay?"

"Okay." Josey replies, keeping his eyes on Luther and shaking his hand. "Goodbye, mithter."

Luther waves again just before Milton passes by and ushers him back out of the room. They return to the hallway and close the door behind them. There's a moment of odd silence as Milton keeps his head down, unable to make eye

contact.

"So..." He starts his voice low and quiet. "Can that spare us the killin'?"

Luther waits for Milton to lift his head, but he doesn't. He's clearly embarrassed. Or maybe just nervous.

He did just play his ace on the first hand? Maybe he's got a point. Maybe it's time to leave and just let this one play out for itself...

"I'm not really sure." Luther starts, trying to keep an even grip on his voice. He needs to keep it professional, but he can't resist asking the obvious question still staring him in the face.

"Where is his skin?"

Milton's body appears to physically break, letting its protective shell crumble away and scatter across the floor. His eyes are nearly rimmed with water. There's a smile, the breath of relief on his face.

"So you are curious, huh? He keeps it in the closet. Gotta keep the oil on it or it'll go bad." He answers politely. "But he never puts it on when it's this hot out."

Feeling a bit pinned in the corner, Luther's eyebrows lift high on his forehead as he's suddenly drawn to the other four doors in the hallway. Each one is closed and for all he knows, possibly harboring some more otherworldly creatures like Josey. Milton seizes his opening and continues with his pitch.

"Not too many have ever seen that, Mr. Luther. Josey there was born as what they called a grease-monkey. He's been able to take his skin off like that ever since he was a baby."

Luther's eyes return to Milton. All scientific reasoning has nearly evaporated from his thoughts.

"A baby? But how did he... I mean... When did it come off?" He stammers, the questions coming faster than he can process them. "And how does he get back in? And what if he leaves it off too long? Will it die or will he outgrow it?"

Milton just laughs, thoroughly enjoying every moment of his excitement.

"So that will work then? You are taken by idea, I can tell. And so will others. People will come from everywhere to ask those same things, won't they?"

Luther is pushed further in the corner. His face slams on the brakes, looking directly at Milton and pausing deliberately for that ideal combination of awkward tension and impatient excitement to boil over. Milton holds his ground

however, giving him the thousand mile stare from an old soldier.

He's got a point and he knows it. Nobody would have to die this way and the boy is genuinely intriguing. If they played their cards right and released the information to just the right people, the science community alone would be enough to put a spark back in Mannsville. Josey the living Grease Monkey. I could wor –

"No." Luther answers, cold. "I'm not here to open a freak show."

Milton's face hardens. The broken lines around his eyes sink all the way down around his mouth. The skin on his forehead bunches in the center, squeezed between his eyebrows. All of the frustration from their conversation in the kitchen returns. He pulls in a deep breath and again lets it all out through his nose.

"Then you get out." He mumbles, holding himself back. "I told you we ain't killin' nobody for this town! If Josey ain't enough for you, then I'll go about findin' someone else!"

Luther lifts his chin, flexing his jaw and looking down at Milton with a sort of expected understanding. He's been down this road before, dozens of times. Most of them finally come around to the killing idea, but for some reason this time it doesn't feel quite right.

They got something here and they know it. They don't need me for this...

"I'm sorry, Milton." He says, offering his hand to shake. Milton doesn't even acknowledge it and just slowly shifts his eyes over Luther's shoulder, back to the stairs.

"You can use the same door you came in."

Luther slowly retracts his hand and begins down the hall. "Okay, then. Good luck with your grandson."

He leaves Mannsville without another word and checks in to the room he booked a few hours away. He sits there with a half bottle of Kentucky consolation and the rumble of an encroaching thunderstorm. With nothing else to do, he hangs his head back and runs through every possible scenario Milton might take to lever Josey into saving the town. *Without killing him...*

And of course, none of them are going to work. A freak show will never last.

"Hey, what do you think..." He says out loud, right before the bottle hits his lips. The whiskey splashes down his throat and two large bubbles enter the bottle before he pulls it away and continues. "I mean, c'mon. You've done this before. Do you think we should just use that boy?"

His voice fills the room, directed at someone, but there's nobody else there. Nobody answers. But it doesn't matter. He just waits anyway, chewing the side of his mouth and staring up at the ceiling in a half-drunken stupor. His eyes narrow, pupils wide and black. The anger starts to spread from the corner of his mouth, gnashing his teeth, pissed off by Milton's stubbornness, his complete ignorance. Scowling, he turns his head and looks outside. The rain beats against the glass, turning the headlights and taillights of Kentucky into a streaking, blooming fireworks display.

That ain't Mannsville out there. That's a real town.

"A freak show in a little dying town. How many times are we gonna hear this from these goddamn old timers? They know what they got, but they just sit on it. A kid like that is a goddamn goldmine in the short run but he's just not gonna last. Not long enough to save that town. They'll just take him out of there and then it'll all be over. And they know it! They know it and they still had the gall to fucking call us. They knew who we were. They knew what we do. So why the hell they call us? We don't do freak shows. We don't compromise. We do murders because that's what sells. The bigger and more bizarre, the better. It's permanent. What this jackass doesn't realize is that he's the one actually killin' that town. If he'd just step out of our fuckin' way..."

Luther pulls his head away from the window and snaps himself forward, lifting the whiskey bottle back behind his head. "But he ain't gonna budge and this whole thing is just another waste of our goddamn time. Let him do his freak show. Go ahead, Milton! You get 'em to come see you. Show 'em that boy and have your GODDAMN FREAK SHOW!"

His hand whips forward and sends the bottle sailing through the room. It collides with the bathroom door with a loud, dull thud. The wood splinters around an inverted pyramid-shaped hole and the bottle falls. It strikes the tile on the floor and shatters. A shimmering display of golden spirits and broken glass spills across the floor. Inside the bathroom, there's a sudden loud terrified squeal...

"Good to know you're awake in there!"

Luther ignores it and laughs. He snarls and wipes his greasy hair back with both hands, holding them at the sides of his head, as if he were about to crush his skull between them.

BRINNNNG! BRINNNNG!

The phone beside the bed suddenly screams with life, jarring him off balance. His hands drop to his sides, pulling bits of his hair out on either side of

his head where it remains as if he had just been hit by lightning. His head slowly rotates toward the phone.

It rings again.

And again. And again. And a — *fucking* — gain until he finally picks it up.

“Yes?! What is it?”

The voice in the earpiece crackles. The thunder outside echoes a few seconds later through the phone. There’s a cough and a voice begins.

“Mr. Blacktop? It’s Milton from Mannsville.”

Luther pulls the phone from his ear, tempted to smash the receiver straight through the top of the bedside table.

Here he is. They always call back. Always try again.

Lightning flashes outside and the rain begins battering the windows.

“No freak shows. I told you that when I left. That’s not up for negotia —”

“Alright, I understand. You’re absolutely right. It ain’t enough to just show the boy.”

Milton’s voice sounds defeated and hoarse. He’s been up to something since they parted ways. Luther rolls his head to the side, cracking his neck.

“Alright, let’s hear it. What do you want from me?”

There’s a long pause. It’s hard to tell if Milton’s crying or it’s just extra static. He coughs again and then begins.

“If you gotta do some killin’ then I want it to be the boy. He’s fit to bring ‘em back.”

Luther’s face slackens. He can hardly believe what he just heard. The alcohol is purged from his blood by a sudden charge of adrenaline. He feels a smile form on his face.

A full one-eighty. How about that? The old man’s going to do it. Bought it all off of one necklace, too. I knew it. I knew it would work. We’re going to bring this town back, goddamnit!

The rush is bittersweet, but that’s just the way it has to be. That’s the only way it even has a chance. Luther holds his grin, still unable to reply while his brain starts blocking together a brand new plan.

There’s going to be a lot of setup. It’s going to take at least a week to get everything

in place, just right. And what's the distraction going to be? We've got to get the other people in town looking the other way...

"Are you there, Mr. Blacktop? I wanna do this, right now when there ain't nobody watchin'."

The whiskey in Luther's gut starts to swirl, reaching up and reminding him of his position with a punch to the back of the throat. He almost pukes.

Wait now, Milton, that's just plain murder. There's nothing to be gained from that. But... then again, it's a start. We're on the right track... But no, it's too small. It has to be bigger than that. Without witnesses, it'll never be more than just another mile marker. No, it needs to be big. A great big billboard. Something that will bring the people. It's got to make the news... the news brings the people... It's always the news that saves the town.

"Okay, wait for me."

Luther tosses the phone on the bed and yanks open the top drawer of the table. He's frantic now. His neck is sweating. A pile of takeout menus hit the floor first, followed by the King James and a laminated local directory. The bottom of the drawer is visible.

"Shit! Where the fuck—"

He pulls harder, ripping the drawer from its track and breaking its two tiny stoppers clean off. One more book falls out, sliding across the carpet toward the door. He takes one glance at it and lets out a sigh of relief. The smile returns to his face, more devilish than ever. He snatches up the phone.

"Milton, are you there?"

"Uh huh. What was all of that?"

"Nothing. Just finding my things. I'll meet you in Mannsville exactly two hours from this minute." His voice is hard and precise. *The wheels are already turning. Step on it.*

"Wait, Mr. Blacktop?"

"Yeah?"

Milton steadies himself, his lips smacking through the phone. He lets out a deep breath and let's his voice drop, filling it with backbone.

"I'm going to do it. Not you. You can be there to do whatever you need to, but that's it. Meet me at my service station. I'll bring the boy and you'll find us there."

Luther's hand begins to quiver. His blood is on fire with possibilities.

“Sure. Okay. Milton, he’s all yours but don’t do anything until I get there, all right?”

There’s just static on the other end. He hangs up the phone and looks up, staring out the window for only a moment while the rest of the night rolls itself out in front of him. Walking to the door he bends over and picks up the book that slid across the floor earlier. *It’s the local phone directory.*

“Now stay quiet in there.” He shouts, tipping his head toward the bathroom door but keeping his eyes glued to the pages passing under his fingers. “We won’t have much time...”

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe...

The storm continues to pound the road all the way back to Mannsville. There’s not another soul to be seen, just a yellow line to follow into the heart of nowhere. Lightning continues to flash in the sky, drawing jagged silhouettes of the surrounding forest in the car windows. Glancing at the dashboard, Luther knows he’s already late. That goddamn phone call took way too long. Milton’s probably getting antsy. He’s probably deciding if he should do it to the boy or do it to himself instead.

Just hang in there, old man. It’ll all be over ten minutes after we get there. At least it better be or we’re going to be answering a lot of fuckin’ questions...

He pushes the pedal down harder, squeezing every extra horse he can find from his *late-nineties, 210-horse, Ford 3.8L V6 Thunderbird*. The original engine is rolling over two-hundred thousand, but she still screams like a cat with its tail on fire.

“We’ll be there any minute.” He announces, looking into the rearview mirror. The backseat is dark, but there is a shape that blocks part of the back window. It doesn’t move. “All right, you remember everything we talked about, don’t you?”

The shape remains still, but Luther smiles anyway. His thumbs roll back and forth across the front of the steering wheel, physically ticking off each step of the plan. Up ahead a single light begins to crawl out of the darkness. It’s barely visible, not much brighter than a star on a clear night. It’s the edge of town, the last bit of reflective paint on Mannsville’s welcome sign. Milton’s Grease ‘n Tire is only another block away.

Luther kills the headlights and lets the Thunderbird slow to a growl. The rain pounds with growing ferocity against the roof. He takes it slow, noticing the very faint glow in the windows of the office. Making a wide right, he pulls around to the back of the garage, careful not to drive on anything with a good

memory.

The backside of the garage is blocked by piles of scrap metal and soggy pallets. There are barrels and dumpsters and old cars lined up for the rest of the block. It a whole junkyard that easily doubles the footprint of the whole town. Milton's truck is parked by the back door. He's left the driver-side door wide open.

"Looks like he was in a hurry."

Luther clicks the key back in the ignition. Starved of fuel, the Thunderbird shakes a few times and then chokes to death on an overflow of exhaust. Luther breathes out, listening to the clatter of falling rain and reaches into the glove box. Pulling out a small black bag, he proceeds carefully, resting back in his seat and dumping the contents of the bag into his lap. The first thing to appear is a large, sheathed knife. Its handle is thin and made of wood with four small brass rivets, the kind that comes out only on Christmas to whittle the turkey. Behind that, falls out a small packet of off-brand antacids.

"There you are," Luther laughs, shaking his head. "My lucky charms."

Popping off the top of the pill vial, he lifts it to his lip and throws his head back. A number of small white tablets roll into his mouth and he swallows them down in seconds. Emptied, the vial hits the floorboards of the passenger side, along with the ceremonial knife without another thought. Luther keeps the only thing left in the bag—a clean pair of black, leather gloves.

"Mannsville, you're about to be famous."

As he opens the car door, the storm slaps his face with a sharp, cold sting. It's worse now than then when they left. The humidity is still peaking, raising a foggy mist above the ground. *Nice setup.* Within seconds, every stitch of clothing on his body is wet. He keeps his head down and walks around to the back side of the car, stopping for only a second to pop open the back door. It rocks free of the frame only an inch before he lets go of the handle and proceeds to the trunk. There, Luther stands and waits, letting his mind run through the scenario one more time. A stream of water creeps down across his forehead just as his eyes rediscover the glow of the office lights through slivers of a boarded up window.

While he stares at it, something passes in front of the window and blocks it out. *Something head shaped. Milton's head shape.* He stands perfectly still, not making any other motions with his hands or body. He knows that they can see each other, but he hasn't acknowledged it at all. Luther waits, letting the rain continues to run down his face, rolling into the corner of his mouth and soaking into his grin.

Ready if you are...

He leaves the car and heads straight for the back door. Straight for Milton's head-shadow. The wind follows him in, filling the darkened garage with a rustle of flapping tin and swinging chains. With it comes the clinging bite of kerosene and an overpowering reek of rancid oil. It burns the back of Luther's throat, forcing his head down and close to his chest. He covers his mouth and remains focused on the open back door.

Here I come, ready or not...

Luther pushes through the doorway and starts into the first bay of the shop, careful to keep his footsteps as quiet as possible. Inside, the shadows are lumpy with metal cans and various garbage. There are benches piled high with dusty boxes of obsolete parts. Tire balancing machines line the back walls, blocked off by several overflowing scrap drums and a hanging engine block. The choking stench of oil grows even worse inside. It passes across his skin like black smoke rolling off burning plastic.

Luther's eyes narrow, already dry and sore. He steps across an old oil trench and slips into the second bay, then the third until he finds the window that Milton was standing at only a few moments earlier. He's gone now, but nearby, the door to the shop's only office hangs open just a crack. Luther holds still, listening to the voices whispering inside. They both speak with a noticeable lisp, slow and deliberate, like repeating instructions...

Whatever you're doing in there, don't fuck with me, Milton...

The glove on Luther's right hand tightens into a fist, crinkling the leather. He turns his body to the side, craning his head toward the opening. Closer now, the familiar reek of Josey's bedroom begins to spread across his face. The pungent, sickly sweetness sticks to his lips and his teeth. He breathes, in and out, shallow at first, trying to get used to it as fast as possible. *But it's too much.* It's stronger than it was in the house, *way stronger.* It strikes him straight on the chin, sending the whole room into a spin...

Lightning flashes on every side of building followed immediately by a crushing explosion of thunder. Luther stumbles, finding a door behind him pushed loose in the storm. *Fresh air.* He backs away from the office but his lungs pull in another breath tainted with their poison. The blood starts to flush out of his face. His stomach turns. He feels the vomit rising.

Oh, shit...

The back door is suddenly blocked. Its presence resets his drive, puts him back in the moment. He sees a thin, dark shape pass behind the frame.

“All right, Milton,” Luther swallows, regaining his balance. “What the fuck are you doing?”

In a second, Milton’s there and the next he’s gone, hidden again in the first stall where Luther originally entered the building. He coughs and shakes his head. His heart is racing. His feet holding still.

“Mither, Blacktop.” Milton’s voice rises. *Or is it? It’s different now...* Luther’s jaw tightens. Milton is advancing. He weaves through the garage like a cat, completely silent until he’s right up behind Luther. “I want one more chanth for you to reconthider.”

Luther remains near the incoming breeze and turns around slowly. His blood pressure is beginning to rise. The phone call comes rushing back to him, shaking his lungs, pumping the blood back into his head. *Goddamn it, old man, you can’t back out now. There are way too many things in motion...* The office door swings open a little further and reveals Josey inside. The walls are lined with pale green file cabinets, paper-piled tables and dirty tools. Josey is resting in the center of the tiled floor. His skin lies in a pile beside him, reflecting the glow of the lamplight from every fold and twist.

“Milton?”

Luther steps forward again, more than ready to put this whole night behind him as quickly as possible. Josey hears his approach and smiles. Turning away from the lamp, the hard shadows fill in across his eyes and sink into the wrinkled sinew around his mouth. They sharpen his features, casting him as a mocking, conjured demon. His lips, looking like red-soaked yarn, part around his teeth. He’s happy.

Because he’s changed the plan...

Luther quells the anger inside him and buys a few more seconds of patience. Josey shivers a little as the storm winds reach him. He leans forward, letting his eyes fill with light. They’re bloodshot, shifting back and forth while he reaches for the door.

“Grandpa, it’th that man from my bedroom.”

“Good.” Milton answers, his voice weak and softened with a serpent-like lisp. “Pleath thpeath inthide Mither Blacktop. I need you to thee thomething.”

“Milt—” Luther begins to protest but instead locks his fists at his sides. *One more chance. This is it.* Impatient and pensive, he steps into the room and waits while Milton pushes the door shut from behind. His hand comes into view first, holding the knob from the back side.

Luther's angry mouth slams shut, holding back the reflex to scream...

Milton's hand is nothing more than a gnarled ball of dark red muscles and bones. *No skin*. His arm follows and then his shoulder, his side and then his face. All skinless and covered in a thin layer of translucent, yellow grease. Luther steps back and looks him in face.

So it runs in the family...

Milton stares back. His eyes appear three times larger than normal, glowing in the light. Below them, his yellowed teeth bite together, revealing that a few of his molars are missing. There are gaps in his jaw line hidden between the weathered muscles sagging from his cheeks. Luther swallows, suddenly feeling like a lion that has just watched the corpse of his last dinner get up and walk away.

"Now you know our thecret." Milton reveals with a crooked smile. His tongue licks at the roof of his mouth, molding each word carefully before it passes between his lips.

"Thurely, together we are worth more to you than a chair in the circuth."

Luther puts a little more distance between them to take in the full picture of Milton's thin, knobby frame. Without skin, his chest heaves above every breath, the muscle tissue flexing, cascading across his ribs and down over the top of his stomach. He's so much thinner, a half of the man he met earlier today. However, unlike Josey, his skin is only *partially* removed. It's split open down his right side from his armpit to his hip. He's unzipped himself through the opening, letting the flesh hang around his waist like a pair of wet overalls. The arms and fingers swing freely beside his knees, inside-out and yellow.

Luther takes a deep breath, hiding his emotions behind a face chiseled through experience. Milton rolls his eyes over at Josey and watches him look away, frowning with disappointment already.

"I knew he wouldn't do it, Grandpa. I told you."

"Milton, what is this?" Luther asks, "Do you think two grease monkeys are better than one?"

Milton suddenly snarls as if had just swallowed boiling water. There's a loud groan in his throat, much louder than if he were still wearing his skin.

"Mither Blacktop, there ain't another thoul in a thouthan mileth that hath theen what you are theeing right now."

Luther glances down at the flesh coat hanging over Milton's belt, and then

to the wall behind him and the open drum resting in the corner. It's hand-stenciled in white paint, *GEAR OIL*. There's a fresh trail spilled on the floor, spreading between both Milton and Josey.

"But your son has seen it, hasn't he?" Luther asks. "And he's disgusted."

Milton's teeth come together. His paper thin lips squirm across them like a pair of earthworms. "That ain't his worth. It's that woman he's with. She ain't no good for this family. Not for this town."

So that's what this is all about... You got a problem with his wife. Okay, let's run with that.

"She's gone, Milton. And she's been gone for a long time." Luther leans forward, adding heft to his voice. "I didn't talk to her and your son didn't even mention her. He told me about this grease, though. And he hated it. He hates what you are and the people around here do, too. They've left here because of you."

"You're a liar." Milton reels, "That's not true."

"Yes, it is. They left because they were scared. To put a freak in a cage is one thing. You can charge admission to see it. You can drag them from town to town and collect a decent income. But to have them out in the open, like you and Josey, that doesn't work. That makes people nervous. They get scared and they leave. Or—"

"Or they come and bear witness." Milton cut him off. He's visibly desperate. "They'll pay good money to see you if we do it right!"

"No, they'll pay good money to come here to kill you. The only thing better than seeing a freak is killing one and being the lucky bastard who did it. You start advertising this and you'll both be dead before you see a single dollar."

Milton is fully taken aback. His bare chin tips into the air and he steps away, pacing toward Josey with the weight of revelation bearing down on his bare collarbones. He stops above Josey, looking down at the back of his wet skull. Josey's eyes are closed and his head rocks back and forth. His lips look like they are counting something inside his head.

Outside, the storm rages on. There would be sirens going off if this town had any. There's just loose tin overhead and the whole room sounds like it's threatening to come down on top of them. Luther holds his ground, watching as the grease, muscles and tallow of Milton's face look like he just bit into a whole lemon. His knobby, skeletal fingers roll up into two fists, flexing his forearms, as if they were a pair of coiled serpents, ready to strike.

And then he exhales and all of that pent up emotion calmly drains from his body.

"You're going to thpend eternity licking at the devilth booth for thith, Mither Blacktop." Milton preaches, his voice steady and calculated. He steps away from Josey. "You go on and do it now. If thath your only way."

Luther shakes his head and looks back at the window above Josey. In the reflection on the glass he sees Milton slouching, hanging his head low as he inches closer to his original place behind the door, closer to the oil drum. He sees Josey too, still counting the imaginary things running through his skinless skull. He's well up well over a hundred. Then Luther catches a glimpse of himself and for just an instant there's something else. There's a shadow standing in the doorway behind him. It's waiting patiently just beyond the edge of the lamp-light...

You asked for this...

"Alright, Milton. You've got a deal. I'll hit him first." He says glancing at the desk in the opposite corner of the room and the large steel crowbar leaning against the wall directly behind it.

"But then you're going to finish him."

Without taking his eyes off the old man, Luther carefully steps around Josey and reaches for the crowbar. Josey doesn't budge but he's still mumbling. Milton visibly swallows, but gives no protest.

"It's okay." Luther begins, pulling his eyes away from Milton and preparing himself. Just sit still now. It'll all... be over—"

Then, just as Luther's fingers touch the crowbar, Josey suddenly jumps up from the floor. He throws his hands out and runs straight for the window.

"NOOOO!"

He screams at the top of his lungs and crashes into the glass. It cracks, but it doesn't break from the frame. His hands pull back, cupping into sharp, spiky fists, and beat against it, splattering grease. Josey pounds again and again with everything he's got but the window holds. Luther yanks the crowbar off the wall and pulls it back, aiming to sink the first blow into his lower spine.

"Now, Joethy! C' mon boy, git him!"

From behind him, Milton suddenly reappears. Luther spins around, but he's too late. Milton is on him before he can react, wrapping a sleeve of his skin coat around his neck and cinching it as tight as he can. It stretches and constricts like

a noose. Luther fights to pull it free, but it's too slippery to hold. It's soon crushing his throat and cutting off his breath.

Nice move, Milton. I didn't think you had it in you.

His feet flounder beneath him, stepping onto Josey's pile of skin. It smears across the floor like a large pizza and steals Luther's balance. He slips and begins to fall, keeping one hand on the skin sleeve wrapped around his neck. With the other he tries to steady the crowbar and take a swing.

But before he can, there's a sudden jolt of electrical pain in his wrist. He drops the weapon and finds Josey's teeth gnashing back and forth, sinking through his glove and breaking the skin underneath. The pain is sharp and hot. He tries to shout but the words can't escape.

Milton laughs in triumph and pulls the skin even tighter around Luther's neck. The reek of old, rotten blood fills his nostrils. The taste gets trapped in his mouth. He struggles, bucking his shoulders against Milton and finally throwing Josey's snapping mouth away from his hand. Starved of blood, his mind thinks everything is on fire. The room begins to bloom with exploding red stars.

"You're gonna thave thith town alright, Mither Blacktop. All... by... yourthelf!"

THUNK.

Luther sinks the crowbar into something fleshy near his side. There's no sound. No scream. He jerks his hand back, but the bar won't budge. It's stuck wherever it is. There's pain but it's in his wrist. He's losing feeling in his legs.

Shit, did I hit myself?

He strains his neck to see and let's go of the crowbar. It could have been his own body, maybe Milton's...

Then Josey falls onto the floor, shaking and choking.

"OH GOD, JOETHY! NO!!"

Milton cries, letting his snare fall slack around Luther's throat. He drops to his knees and reaches for his grandson. "No! God, no. Joethy, you can't go now!"

Released from Milton's grip, Luther's feet lose the battle with Josey's skin and finally shift out from under him. His head slaps against the hard, tiled floor, washing the room with a bright, purple explosion.

Luther wheezes, gasping for air and fighting through the pain to reopen his throat. The familiar burning toxic reek rips down his throat, purging the blue

from his face. It burns but its air. His mind rushes forward. With Milton distracted, he has to work quickly. He pushes his hands down into Josey's skin sack, lifting himself off the floor and away from the chaos.

Milton is working frantically, his red fists wrapped around the end of the crowbar still lodged in his grandson's body. The wound sputters with escaping air while he pulls with all of his weight. From inside, there is a loud deflating gust of air just before the bar slowly begins to slide free.

"Joethy... thtay alive... Joethy..."

Milton falls back, dropping the bar onto the floor between them. The criss-crossed muscles on his face tremble while he watches Josey's face swell in shock. The boy can no longer draw a breath. His hands and feet shake uncontrollably just before he coughs up the last swallow in his throat. Blood foams out of his mouth and his nose.

A pool begins to form around him, shimmering with purple, blue, pink and green. Bubbles rise up from his nose but he doesn't make another sound.

"You... You killed my own..." Milton begins to stand up, fresh blood dripping from his skinless fingertips. There's a bright flash of lightning just outside the window, followed by a house-shaking clap of thunder. "You can't leave thith plathe."

Milton's eyes are glazed with horror and hate. Luther feels the air ignite between them for only a moment before something else suddenly diverts Milton's violent attention. Luther knows immediately what it is. He can feel it standing over his shoulder. He watches Milton's eyes open wide, nearly falling from their bony sockets.

It's about time.

"What? No... You were to come alone!"

Luther lowers his head and steps to the side, revealing the thing – *the creature* – standing behind him. It's a man. *A huge man.* His head emerges from the shadowed doorway first. All black, covered entirely with black rubber. There are clusters of tiny holes covering his eyes and the underside of his nose. His breath whistles through them, heavy and rough. The rubber wraps over his neck, his shoulders, and his chest. It contours his bulbous, hulking body, smooth and tight, like a second skin. The vacant eyes of the mask stare straight ahead, hollow, cold and calculating. They survey the whole room without moving, dissecting it piece by piece.

Then from inside the mask, the man squeals like a rutting boar. His voice

rings out, animalistic and unnatural. His whole body trembles as if had just been electrically prodded from behind. His rubber-covered hands lift from the shadows, followed by another deep, guttural growl. His head twitches to life, rooting through the air to sniff out the trail of his wounded prey.

“What ith thith, Luther? There wathn’t thuppoth’d to be anyone elth in here!”

Milton backs away defensively and lifts the bloodied crowbar from the floor. His body shakes, the muscles sagging, struggling to remain attached to his bones. He cowers, putting Josey’s dead body between them.

Luther stands up, straightening his suit and wiping the grease from his face. He purposely ignores the question and instead focuses his attention to the big man.

“Do it like I told you.”

The rubber beast acknowledges him by leaving his side, moving straight for Milton.

“Oh God, pleathe no... no!” Milton swings the crowbar through the air in front of him desperately. “I didn’t want thith. Thith wath not what my thun wanted. I talked to him after you did. He didn’t want thith!”

But before Milton can turn the tables once again, it’s all over. Luther’s beast lunges forward, ravenous with hunger. He snorts and wraps his fist around Milton’s forearm. The crowbar is knocked from his hand and shatters a piece of the floor. Milton’s jaw falls open, stretching the muscles on either side of his face. He trips and falls back, flopping into the squishy tubes of skin hanging off his waist.

The big man lunges forward, crushing Milton’s arm and twisting it back upon itself. The bones snap like old, dry wood, letting the muscles fall limp around them. He tries to scream, but there’s no chance. The beast punches into Milton’s loose skin and retrieves his belt. It breaks free from his waist and flies across the room.

Milton shrieks, kicking his feet and pounding his shattered, bloody knuckles against the big man’s face and shoulders. In response, the man in the mask exhales with unbridled, primal rage. His hands lash out and tear Milton’s pants down over his backside, sticky and soiled with filth. He gasps, trembling like a freezing child. He wails and pounds his fist against the floor, choking on a plea for help, crying for mercy.

The exposed skin on his legs appears loose and saggy and covered in

hundreds of erratic, varicose veins. The big man punches again, seizes a large fold of skin on either thigh and starts to pull.

"Oh no! NO! Not without the greath!" Milton begs. The skin around his legs snaps free like a length of duct tape ripped off a wall. The exposed muscles swell and burn red, breaking out in a ripple of blisters. Milton's eyes shake in their sockets. The pain must be unbearable. He slaps his unbroken hand on the ground, splashing in the oil beside him.

"AHHHHH!"

And then his skin is off completely. The big man roars with pride from inside his mask and beats the skin suit against his chest like a boastful gorilla. Milton is overcome with shock, left bloody and shaking. He coils his broken body into itself and starts to have a seizure. His head jerks back and forth uncontrollably. The big man snorts and stands up, finished with his orders and eagerly awaiting its next instruction from the boss.

"That's good." Luther says, his face solemn, surveying the whole scene. Josey is dead. His blood and the grease having mixed into a single solution that continues to spread across the floor. There are papers soaked in it, clumps of dirt and mold breaking up the texture just enough to give it that old-time American slaughterhouse look. *That's good. That'll work.* He nods, parting his lips just a fraction of an inch but then suddenly stops...

No, wait. There's something wrong. This isn't good enough. It might sell a little special grease. Probably something they'll call, "Mannsville Skinning Oil". That's good, but it's just a side note. It'll be a joke. It's too weird. It's too questionable. No, it's not good enough. There needs to be just one thing. One easy, iconic something...

Luther chews his lip while the big man waits, huffing through the air holes in his mask.

Come on, it has to be here. There has to be something to market. Something they can put on a billboard. Put on the cover of the low-budget documentary. Something they can shrink down and put on a keychain. It has to be something they can hold in their hands. Something to transfer the feeling of this moment. The curiosity. The power...It has to be something that can send cold shivers down the spine of a young girl. Something that just the sight of in this town will drive her straight into her boyfriend's backseat before he takes her home.

His lip chewing stops. He reaches down and plucks the crowbar from the mess of grease and blood and tallow spread all across the floor.

"They sell these in every hardware store in America, but after this they'll all come from Mannsville."

Luther hands it over to the big man with a mischievous smile. He glances down sidelong across his face, catching Milton right in the eye.

“Make it bad. We need *everyone* to come and see this.”

Have YOU ever been there?

Have you ever seen a young boy take off his own skin as if casually removing his t-shirt and trousers? Have you ever poked a stick at what lives under the swamp? Have you ever been forced to watch a 600-pound woman eat her own limbs? Have you ever been to a bar so deep in the woods that you'll never find it twice? Have you ever made it on the roof of an abandoned grain bin filled with headless birds? Have you ever felt a worm scratch the inside of your skull? Have you ever seen what witches actually do with fresh bodily fluids? Have you ever noticed that your daughter is carrying around a hairless cat that eats other cats?

Never Been There is a collection of these sordid and morbid tales and even a few more. Be warned however. These are each nothing if not extreme. They will drag you kicking and screaming through all of these places, show you all of these things and do so in such exquisite, grotesque detail that they will dare you not to flinch.

The full *Never Been There* collection includes 10 stories: ***Luther Blacktop, Tits on a Chainsaw, Pinochle, Cold, Hard Gash, Janis the Swallower, Spit's Bar, Ditch Witch, Ragamuffin, Japabis and Six Inches Thick.***



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